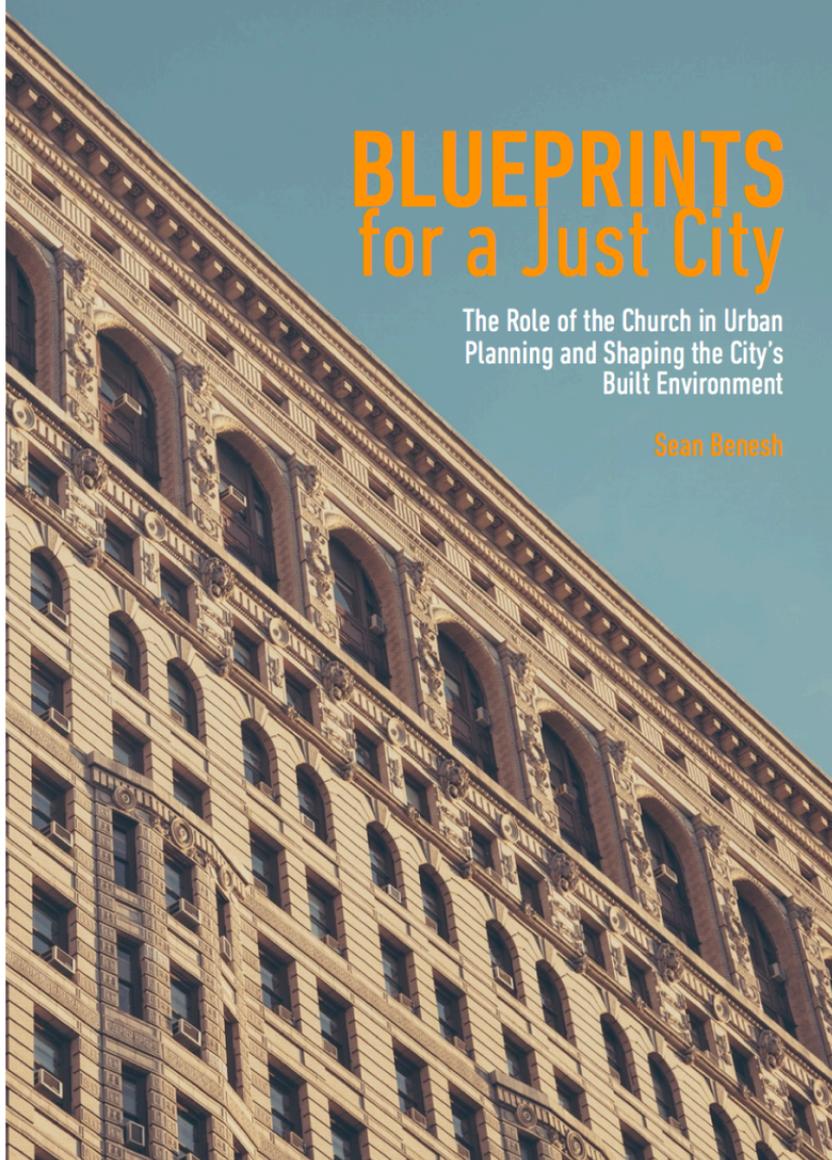# BLUEPRINTS
for a Just City

The Role of the Church in Urban Planning and Shaping the City's Built Environment

Sean Benesh

"We have not thought carefully enough about the role of the church in cultivating a built environment for human flourishing. Sean Benesh helps us to do just that. I'm glad to have his voice in this conversation."

> **Dr. Noah Toly**, Associate Professor of Urban Studies and Politics and International Relations, Director of Urban Studies Program. Author of *Cities of Tomorrow and the City to Come: A Theology of Urban Life*

"Sean's passion for the urban built environment is contagious. He understands that we build our environment and then our environment builds us, thus we ought to participate in designing our cities. It is life-giving to journey with Sean as he explores God's desire to redeem every aspect of life, including architecture, spatial planning and our approach to gentrification, for our story ends in a city.

> **JR Woodward**, National Director, V3 Church Planting Movement, Author, *Creating a Missional Culture*

"As the scholarship and writing about the importance of place in people's lives comes to the fore in our rapidly urbanizing world, the dearth of good, practical thinking about the relationship between the church and the city is a huge liability and missed opportunity. *Blueprints for a Just City* seizes the opportunity to think well on the subject for the sake of both the church's calling and the world's flourishing. Sean Benesh brings together insights from Urban Planning, biblical reflection, theologies of the city, and his own experience living, working, consulting, and traveling in cities across the world in fresh and unique ways to give us

much needed insight for the present and future of our churches and cities."

Dr. Luke J. Goble, Associate Professor of History and Humanities, Warner Pacific College

"Whether they realize it or not, churches have always had influence in shaping cities—sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. In *Blueprints for a Just City*, Sean Benesh offers a much needed primer on how churches can play a critical role in offering grace-filled leadership that results in more just cities and built environments that nurture human flourishing."

Dr. Mark T. Mulder, Professor of Sociology at Calvin College and author of *Shades of White Flight: Evangelical Congregations and Urban Departure* (Rutgers University Press)

"Old Testament prophets addressed kings, nations and cities, crying out for justice, equality and inclusion of everyone— and especially the most vulnerable. Too often books on place-making and the built environment minimize this focus, but Sean Benesh has not. I circled and underlined powerful concepts on almost every page—biblical blue prints that help me see my own blindness of how the streets, sidewalks and buildings create a 'street ballet' of spontaneous life giving fun where people flock to feel connected ... or places too isolated, too big or too tight for us to feel safe and free to really live. Yes, Sean helps us see that God is a City Planner and Architect. He has challenges us to join God's

redemptive work—restoring and healing every fiber of our beings, and the very soul of our cities."

> **Dr. Jill Suzanne Shook,** Professor, Workshop presenter, Catalyst, Author/Editor *Making Housing Happen: Faith Based Affordable Housing Mode*l and *Vivienda y justicia: una perspectiva bíblica*

"Sean Benesh isn't going to like this moniker, but I view him as a modern day prophet at the forefront of a movement helping God's people properly expand their vision of the gospel's relevance and impact. We know the gospel has the power to save individuals and influence society and culture, but we've been slow to consider how that includes the ways cities themselves are planned, designed, and built. Why is this important? Because as Benesh points out, 'The way cities are designed and laid out truly does impact our day-to-day lives more than we realize or can comprehend.' This is why *Blueprints for a Just City* is not only poignant, but also immensely helpful. Christians who take this book to heart will not only gain new biblical insights into the city, they will also have in their hands a practical manual for helping to make cities, towns, neighborhoods, and streets better places to live—and that's a desirable expansion of the gospel's scope."

> **Dr. Chris Elisara,** director of the Project for Placemaking, a program of the Center for Environmental Leadership, and director of the World Evangelical Alliance's Creation Care Task Force whose focus includes sustainable urbanism

Blueprints for a Just City

The Role of the Church in Urban Planning and Shaping the City's Built Environment

SEAN BENESH

To those embodying the Gospel in the built environment of their city ...

Contents

Metrospiritual Book Series

In my first book, *Metrospiritual*, I was looking for a term, as well as a way, to define what an urban-centric approach to faith and Scripture looked like. This came about as I wrestled through how do we reconcile the urban trajectory of humanity throughout Scripture, the current state of rapid urbanization and globalization, along with where we'll spend eternity. In a similar tone, with the church still applying a rural or suburban lens in which to view life, faith, and Scripture, it is time for a new set of lenses. This is what I call metrospiritual. I define it as this, "It is taking an urban lens to the reading, understanding, interpretation, and application of Scripture." The *Metrospiritual Book Series* explores various aspects, elements, ideas, methodologies, and theology of what an urban-centric faith looks like expressed in the city. A *metrospirituality* can have a shaping effect on the way the church lives in, loves, serves, embraces, and engages the city with the Good News of the Kingdom of God.

Sean Benesh

Other Books in the Series

The Multi-Nucleated Church: Towards a Theoretical Framework for Church Planting in High-Density Cities (2015).

The Bikeable Church: A Bicyclist's Guide to Church Planting (2015).

Chapter 1

In Search of the City of God

Throughout history many people have attempted creating not only a utopian society, but cities that reflect visions of a better urban existence. Just this morning found me perusing the internet looking at old photos and descriptions of General Motors' *Futurama* exhibit at the 1939 New York World's Fair. This particular exhibit showcased what life in the future would look like as cities particularly and societies as a whole were formed around the use of the personal automobile. The whole urban landscape must have been shocking to behold in the 1930s with massive skyscrapers and enormous freeways carrying thousands of cars. The car was to be the key to unlock a better urban existence for city dwellers. However, seventy-five years later of seeing this utopian vision become a reality not only in the United States, but globally, has left many clamoring for something else. A new city. A better city. A just city.

It is easy with the benefit of hindsight to fault utopian visions of the past whether they emanated from GM, Le Corbusier's "Radiant City," Ebenezer Howard's "Garden

Cities," Frank Lloyd Wright's "Broadacre City," Brigham Young's founding of Salt Lake City, Baron Haussman's Paris, and so many more. But in each situation there was always an attempt to create something new, something better, and in most cases offer a remedy to what was plaguing urban denizens back then, whether that be over-crowding and pollution in British industrial cities, cramped and chaotic streets in American cities full of an assortment of streetcars, horses, pedestrians, and refuse, or aging and unhealthy medieval building stock in Paris in the mid-1800s. Whatever the impetus, there was a recognition that something was amiss in the life, layout, and function of the city. Unhealthy conditions were plaguing city life to the point where they were having a detrimental impact on local inhabitants physically, socially, spiritually, emotionally, and morally. Something had to be done.

Today, as in every generation since we began living in cities, there are systemic injustices such as corruption, greed, racism, and exclusionary practices that oftentimes become part of the built environment of cities. You see, what usually plagues a city is revealed in urban form. It is the window into the soul of a city. In the same way that a fever is an indicator of an internal infection, the layout of cities reflects what is right and wrong about cities. And one factor that can impact the lives of urban dwellers the most is the built environment. Jeff Speck writes that "the way that we move determines the way that we live."[1] I would add that the way we move is also determined by the spatial layout of cities. The result can be a

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[1] Speck, *Walkable City*, 55.

two-hour, one-way car commute in Los Angeles or a quick bike commute in Portland or Montréal. But the spatial layout of cities is more than simply *how* we move, it impacts *how we live*.

Developing a blueprint for a just or equitable city means that we need to seriously consider the built environment of cities. The challenge comes when we attempt to synthesize this conversation into the role, mission, and scope of the church both globally and locally. Part of the problem is there are great books, academic journals, blogs, online articles, documentaries, and more out there detailing the connection between the built environment of cities and issues of justness, equity, and overall health (physical, social, etc). But where this becomes problematic is in attempting to discern the role or involvement of the church in all this. Recently I finished reading the book *Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design* by Charles Montgomery (which I will cite throughout this book), who does a masterful job of connecting happiness with the built environment of cities. The way cities are designed and laid out truly does impact our day-to-day lives more than we realize or can comprehend. But what I am interested in exploring is what influence or role do we have in urban design? More importantly for the scope of this book, what role does the church (or what role can the church) play in this?

Admittedly that is an odd question which often elicits baffled looks and blank expressions from those being asked it. For many, the role of the church is about dealing with questions and realities on the spiritual plane such as life after death. But life here and now? Not only that, but what

possible part can the church play in influencing cities through urban design? This is where the conversation becomes more tedious and nuanced since churches by and large do not seem to operate in this manner ... or do they? I am convinced the church today, as it has done throughout history, can actually play an active role in shaping urban design, urban form, or the built environment of cities. That is not to say churches are to slip into the planning departments of cities and begin working with urban planners and engineers about how to better design cities. But in smaller increments and with a smaller scope I believe the church can actually have significant influence whether through formal development projects or on a smaller scale through tactical or guerrilla urbanism projects.

Today the church stands at a theologically rich time in history. We live in an urban world. We are confronted with ever-changing urban realities and issues that drive us back to Scripture with humility and determination as we seek to uncover a theology *of* the city and *for* the city. There has been much written over the past few years detailing the realities of global urbanization and how this new urban reality is reshaping how we live. We are truly *homo urbanus*. Alongside these continued population shifts has been the transition to a global Post-Christendom at least in the northern hemisphere and in the West. As the center of gravity of the global church has shifted to the southern hemisphere and the East it has left in its wake the church in Europe and North America in the unconformable position of having to learn to operate and function as a marginalized community of Christ-followers. The good news is that this has forced the

church to continue to hammer through a more robust theology of the Kingdom and the *missio Dei*. A byproduct has been a grueling wrestling match to try to grasp these changing realities and what specifically the role of the church should be as a consequence.

In the era of Christendom, when the church was the center of culture and power, it had the luxury to operate in certain ways. But that reality is now long gone, a change that I believe has been for the betterment of the church as well as for the refinement of its urban theology. As we do theology from below or from the margins we are forced to think through the implications of the Gospel and the call of God's church as God's covenant people rooted in urban centers across the globe. In Christendom we supposedly could "get away with" operating on the spiritual plane, but now we are waking up to the reality that the Gospel has much to say about *every* area of our lives ... the physical, social, moral, and the emotional along with the spiritual. In other words, this whole book and the scope of its conversation really is about the outworking of the Gospel in our cities. What does the Gospel look like in our cities? We know that it simply cannot be solely about populating heaven, but what is the alternative and how far do we take this? How does the nature of the Gospel become revealed or demonstrated in urban form with the church playing an active role in it ?

These are difficult questions that need to be addressed with caution, humility, and grace. There is no time for bipartisan theological squabbles and mudslinging. Like the facets of a diamond, each theological perspective offers us a particular insight into understanding cities. Our ideas get

stretched and we are forced to work through what we believe and why. For example, even though Jacques Ellul's book *The Meaning of the City* irritates me I still appreciate his insights and strong assertions because they give me deeper pause in considering what I believe theologically about cities and why. If I only read authors I like and agree with, I would become insulated, boring, and parochial.

Why is this important today? Wading into the waters of discerning the role of the church in influencing or shaping the built environment of the city means it is crucial to *cross-pollinate* our theology with the global church to catch and glean insights that we would miss if we stayed in our own provincial theological circles. It is also theological arrogance to claim that my middle-class white developed-world theological upbringing is the final say on God's revelation … which is simply not the case. In terms of this book, my hope and intention is to let others speak into this conversation. That will also help me to overcome my own theological blind-spots which would limit the power of the Gospel at work in our cities. Admittedly I lean Reformed but I also hold this perspective with humility and grace.

The discussion and exploration of the role of the church in urban planning and shaping urban form cannot be contained within one theological position. There is much I can learn from my Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters, those in Latin America who are into Liberation Theology, and so many others. To me this book and the nature of the conversation are inherently more theological than pragmatic. However, I do hope it will be practical and helpful as well.

Does the built environment of cities reflect theological presuppositions? I am not saying that urban planners and engineers were necessarily thinking about God, the Bible, and the Gospel while they worked on a new fifty-year master plan or bike routes through a growing commercial district. But it is worth asking what influence does our understanding of the cosmos, who we were created to be, or even some adherence to or acknowledgement of a *divine being* as well as some sense of *calling* influence the layout of our cities? John Friedmann addresses this in the Introduction to *Insurgencies: Essays in Planning Theory* when he notes, "In closing, then, allow me to tell you, the reader, why the idea of planning as a vocation [or *calling*] still appeals to me, and why despite many setbacks, errors, and disenchantments, I nevertheless believe that planning as a field of professional study and practice is as valid a vocation as any other on the horizon."[2] Calling? Who is calling? Why? Does God only call religious "clergy" or does his calling extend to those who may not even acknowledge him? Could we conceive of the notion that God calls "nonreligious" people to lead cities to be more just and equitable? We'll explore this together in the book.

Last week I was walking through the historic streets of Québec City. As we wound our way through the narrow pedestrian-oriented streets the evidence of the influence of the church was abundant and apparent. While the Quiet Revolution has moved the heart of the Québécois away from God and the institutional (Roman Catholic) church, the vestiges of that bygone era when it dominated Québec

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[2] Friedmann, *Insurgencies*, 11.

society still abound. Traversing the cobblestone streets below the Citadel brings the tourist and the resident alike to one historic church after another. Churches, in terms of both culture and architecture, are as much a part of the city's storyline as the French language and conflict with the British. Is this what I mean when I talk about the role of the church in shaping the built environment of the city ... that there should be more church buildings throughout the city? No, but there is no denying the shaping and longstanding influence of urban architecture has on both current and successive generations.

I live in Portland, Oregon. By the time we moved there, Mt. Zion Baptist Church was a shell of a building that showed serious signs of aging and decline. The parsonage next door was no better. The cornerstone of the church building reveals that it was built a hundred years ago by German immigrants, yet it had been empty for years. Once the inner-city neighborhood had been the place to land for German-speaking immigrants. But then it transitioned into a growing African-American community. Eventually the building housed a black church with a different name. But for the last few years there has been no worshipping community meeting there, despite sitting across from the popular and well-trafficked Irving Park.

It is a grandiose structure, simple but elegant, with high-vaulted ceilings adorned throughout with decorated trim and accents. However, the plaster ceiling had been slowly crumbling and the basement smelled musty and mildewed. Prior to us moving to Portland, several attempts had been made to restore both buildings for use hopefully by a new

congregation. But progress was slow. We know this story well because we actually lived in the parsonage for six months as we transitioned and settled into the city. With keys to both the parsonage and the church building, we did a bit of exploring. From finding secret rooms in the house to vintage church signage in the basement it was a quirky fun experience. Work was ongoing, mostly electrical and plumbing, which did not alter the cosmetics of the building.

After we moved out to another place nearby we still frequented the building from time to time. I ended up using the church on a number of occasions for two different seminary courses that I taught as well as for other urban immersion training that we hosted through The Upstream Collective. It was a great spot because the church building and neighborhood proved to be a key talking-point in discussing neighborhood succession, gentrification, the rise of the Creative Class, bicycles, hipsters, and Portland's artisan economy. We had dreams of converting the basement into an incubator for creative start-ups related to church planting and urban mission, but that fell by the wayside. Our pining for using the space creatively waned over time and we moved on to other locations. Eventually I stopped thinking about the building even though we were constantly nearby since our kids went to school mere blocks away.

Last year we began worshipping with and connecting with a church called Door of Hope that met in SE Portland. Within months came word that the church was actually going to move. When they told the congregation about *where* we all became excited … it was the old Mt. Zion building. Over the short span of months they transformed

the entire church building and made the parsonage into the "parish house" which they use for offices and meeting spaces. Since we knew both structures well we were elated to watch the transformation take place.

On the fateful day when the church switched locations from SE to this new NE site we were looking forward to worshipping in this space. We had watched mostly from the outside so we were eager to see what transformations had taken place on the inside. As we walked in for worship one Sunday evening we were utterly shocked, amazed, and elated about the complete renovation of the space. From a dilapidated building that was an empty shell reflecting the urban realities of a changing neighborhood and the blunt force of gentrification, it had become a life-giving, energizing space. It was more than a face-lift; it was a breath of fresh air in a neighborhood that now emits a new aroma.

Last night after I dropped our sons off to the youth group that meets on Wednesday nights I walked over to a nearby coffee shop. As I was walking away from the church building I sensed an energy about the place and all of the activity taking place in and around it. It was fun to see the number of junior high and high school students making use of the space. It was all part of a larger draw to the area. Just across the street is a park were hundreds of people playing kickball, baseball, basketball, frisbee, or lounging on the grass, watching their dogs run around, chasing after waddling and giggling barefoot toddlers, and more. The church building and all of its activities and energies were in sync with the changing neighborhood and park.

So what does this little detour reveal? Quite honestly it reflects both pain and hope. I have a friend who told me that as an urban ministry worker in the 80s someone shot at him from across the street in that same park. Back then and into the 90s the park and neighborhood were completely different. It was part of the African American community that had experienced redlining, exclusion, racism, and neglect before the onset of gentrification.

This old church building showcases the changing dynamics of its neighborhood and even the role it (and many more buildings like it) can continue to exert. From a gathering point for German immigrants to a gathering point for the black community to a gathering point for a mostly, young white crowd, this building has been more than a building, but rather a communicator of the values as well as a window into the soul of the neighborhood.

The church plays a more influential role in a neighborhood and city than we may realize. This example is not about the church being involved in urban planning by any stretch. But through an alteration of the built environment it impacted the neighborhood.

What this highlights is the need to simply have this conversation. How does the church play an active role in urban planning or influencing and shaping the built environment of our cities? Again, this is not about being on the grand scale, but little by little and bit by bit in neighborhoods and districts across the city. As we will see later in the book, at times the church has altered urban form on a much larger scale, but this is more than master-planned

communities and housing developments … although it certainly can include that and much more.

Why is this a conversation needed in the church, especially in light of the ongoing urbanization of the planet? As a collective the church is truly a powerful force for change. That change comes in various forms ranging from what some would perceive as a benevolent spiritual or religious institution all the way to a movement shaped by God's calling to be a covenant people embodying and proclaiming the Gospel. On both fronts (if you will) the church is seen as both an institution and a viral movement of transformation. Given the pace and scope of global urbanization the church needs to now more than ever to live out both of these realities. To a watching world we are an institution (in some countries more than others) that is about helping people … kind of a religious social justice organization. We certainly can capitalize on that view and leverage it for the betterment of the city. On the other hand, we are empowered by the Gospel which has the power to not only transform individual lives, but families, neighborhoods, and cities as well.

It does not take a demographer to realize that rapid changes are taking place in our cities. Inner-cities that were once the home of the African American community are now home to international immigrants from Somalia, Nicaragua, or Nepal. First-ring suburbs that once housed the predominantly white working class are now home to African Americans displaced by gentrification as well as a massive influx of other immigrants. In other words, those communities that we have labeled and defined as "urban" and

"suburban" are changing. The lines blur and the population continues to shift as powerful economic forces either draw in or push out different groups of people. The wealthy still have access to the best amenities of life that the city offers while the poor are shuttled to the more affordable parts of the city whether urban or suburban. This is not only happening in *my* city, but it is happening in *your* city, and most cities globally.

In other words, this conversation is needed because the vast majority of us are impacted by global trends, forces, and movements that shape *how* we live in and interact with cities. Not only that, but it influences *where* we live in the city. Geography is not dead. In fact, it is more important than ever before. Churches are rooted in neighborhoods and districts, urban and suburban alike, across every city. Again, in some cities more than other. When I was in Québec City I learned the sobering reality that there were maybe only five to ten evangelical churches in a city of 800,000. But as churches are located in place they have the opportunity to leverage their presence, whether they own property or lease space, to help shape and influence urban form. Again, as we will get into later, urban form (or the built environment) is not simply a collection of 2x4s, shingles, sidewalks, and roadways, but rather a window into the culture, values, and soul of the city.

Portland is defined by our built environment and it is in the low-density inner-city neighborhoods where the magic of the city is housed and where the bohemian, artisan, or hipster culture thrives. The leafy streets with century-old houses, brew pubs, coffee shops, boutique stores, and the like that are centralized in the many commercial districts shape

and influence the culture and values of their inhabitants. Not only that, but living in close proximity to outdoor amenities such as world-class skiing and mountaineering on Mt. Hood to the scenic Oregon Coast to the breathtaking Columbia Gorge to the glacial and volcanic Cascade Mountains means that urbanites are deeply connected to what lies just beyond the city. The built environment, including the city's *site* and *situation*, influences our day-to-day lives enormously.

The church has a golden opportunity to help or alter a city's storyline through its built environment. This may not effect the skyline of the urban core, but in pockets through formal development or redevelopment to ad hoc attempts at guerrilla or tactical urbanism, I believe that churches are waking up to the powerful reality that they *can* help shape to make it be more just and equitable. This is not merely being *do-gooders*, but actually gets to the very heart and character of God who loves and cares for both urban *people* and urban *places*.[3]

In our search for a just or equitable city we must ask first and foremost ... what does it look like? How will we know when we find it? What will it be like for not only the wealthy, but also the middle class and poor to have access to the gifts and joys that comes with city life? Will we be able to tell if a city is just or not from its built environment? Will it look more or less like low-density suburbs that ring every North American city? Will it look like housing projects such as the notorious Pruitt-Igoe projects in St. Louis that only exacerbated poverty and criminality?

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[3] I have been using this statement for years now, but I first heard and read it used repeatedly by Ray Bakke.

Blueprints for a Just City is about this expedition as we together traverse history and antiquity as well as point to contemporary examples of where and how the church actually is influencing the city via urban form. You might just be surprised at the results. I am trekking into this with an inkling of where this journey leads. It is like I have an old map such as the one roughly sketched out by Lewis and Clark as they floated down the Columbia River towards the Pacific Ocean. Hindsight reveals that while there were certain accuracies on the map, modern cartography has cleaned up and made the map more reliable. My hope is that by the time we are finished that this old map will be updated, scrutinized, and corrected to reveal what really happened as well as what is currently taking place. Like the explorers of old all we can do is point the bow of our boat down river, push off, and go all the while taking copious notes and drawing conclusions from what we see, experience, and discover. My hope is that we will discover the blueprints for a just and equitable city.

Chapter 2

What is So Common About Grace?

When I first began delving into exploring a theology of the city (or a theological / biblical understanding of the city) it felt forced and unnatural. I feared that I was doing a lot of proof-texting and reading modern *urbanity* back into the Bible. I was not accustomed to reading the Bible and thinking about cities, whether ancient cities of the fertile crescent or modern megacities in east Asia, as something that went together. I knew all about the supposed rural perspective and was well-versed in that nuanced framework. Abraham wandered in the back country, Israel took a forty-year camping trip after the Egyptian exodus, God's presence dwelled in a tent in the wilderness, King David was at home in the woods among wild animals before he moved to the city to become king, and Jesus seemed to avoid cities and often told agrarian parables. So when I began injecting an urban framework back into Scripture I soon learned that I didn't need to inject anything. It was already there.

I simply began noticing. The more I pored over Scripture the more I saw how cities were not only integral to the life of biblical characters, but also revealed the larger

process of urbanization that continued to gain momentum across the pages of the Scripture from beginning to end. Finally I concluded that the Bible has *a lot* to say about cities. Once that was settled in my mind all of a sudden it began opening doors into other nuances, pieces, and parts of the story that I was previously blind to (and which I am still discovering). Most notably, more than the basic assertion that "the Bible talks about cities" is for me the developing understanding that there is a sense of divine origination, care, progression, and outcome for cities. In other words, cities are part of God's plan for humanity and the flourishing of culture. There is a blueprint for cities. God is the first urban planner.

In this chapter my goal is not to attempt to persuade you that the idea of cities originated with God, but by assuming this to be true, to then move the conversation forward concerning some of the implications flowing from this. Since cities are the result of divine intent, what did God have in mind when it came to the built environment of cities? Like a developer, whether working on an urban retrofit of a multi-block mixed-use development or suburban master-planned community, is God working off a master blueprint for how cities on planet Earth are to be plotted, laid out, and developed? Is there a way cities are designed that would be closer to God's intentions, ideals, and plan? It is my intention in this chapter to explore and tease out the idea that urban form originates in God and from which we can extrapolate some design principles when looking for blueprint for a just city. As well, we will look at good design and planning as a biblical example of common grace.

Amazing Grace

This morning I was standing at my kitchen counter sipping on Colombian coffee that I ground and made as a pour over as is my normal morning routine. Wake up, fill the kettle with water, and place on the stove top to boil, grind the coffee, and walk through the rest of the steps of making the pour over ... rinse the filter, dump in the ground coffee, soak the coffee, let it bloom, and so on. With a piping hot cup of coffee next to me I begin my daily routine of reading Scripture ... Old Testament, New Testament, and then a Psalm. When a verse or passage piques my interest I copy it down in my journal and think about it. Afterwards I write in my journal and then write down what I am praying about and for as well as what I am trusting the Lord for. This morning was no different. As I read through Acts 14 a well-known verse leapt off the page at me (actually the screen since I read the Bible on an ebook reader).

"In past generations he [God] allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness."[1] This is a passage I have read countless times, investigated further, and used when teaching on common grace. However, like viewing a precious jewel from another angle, I caught a different perspective of this passage. There is no doubt that as I live and breathe each day I carry around in my head ideas from this manuscript as I mull over what I am

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[1] Acts 14:16-17.

writing and where I am going (or hope to) with certain concepts. I am always on the lookout for ideas, stories, illustrations, quotes, and more. Perhaps with the added jolt of caffeine from my cup of coffee I was struck anew with this passage and story in Acts 14.

Paul and Barnabas were in Lystra healing and teaching. To those Lystrians who observed these miracles and listened to the power of Paul proclaiming the Gospel, they leapt to the assumption that who stood before them were none other than the gods Zeus and Hermes. After hearing these claims and the people's desire to worship them, Paul and Barnabas tore their garments and cried out, "Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them."[2] It was following this statement that they spoke what I previously quoted in verses 16-17.

Obviously the people of Lystra were not monotheists; they worshipped a multitude of fickle gods. This is when and where Paul drives home the point: not only is there the *One true God*, but he created and sustains everything they see around them. But Paul doesn't stop there. He even goes as far as revealing to the populace of Lystra, who do not acknowledge nor worship this God, that God lovingly cares for them *regardless* of whether they knew it or not. In other words, there is one God. And unlike their fickle and

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[2] Acts 14:15.

pernicious pantheon of gods, he loves and cares for them, meets their needs, and blesses them ... "just because."

Most of the time we simply stop there and move on. We may be reminded of another verse where Jesus explains, "For he [the Father] makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."[3] But what does this mean? Particularly, what does it mean in the context of this conversation about healthy, just, and equitable cities? This is where the doctrine of common grace is more exquisite, extravagant, and comprehensive than we may realize. Again, most often when we read this last passage in Matthew 5 or Paul's statement in Acts 14 we end up reducing the scale of this notion of common grace to merely an agricultural context, that common grace is exemplified by God bringing rain and sunshine on the crops of farmers whether they respond in love and worship towards God or do not even acknowledge his presence let alone existence. But is common grace only limited to plants, farming, and all-things *not* connected to the city?

According to the ever-popular Wikipedia, common grace "is common because its benefits are experienced by, or intended for, the whole human race without distinction between one person and another. It is grace because it is undeserved and sovereignly bestowed by God."[4] That suffices. We could spelunk into a multi-volume systematic theological tome to find a definition from a dead (or living) theologian but all of the various definitions are roughly the

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[3] Matthew 5:45.

[4] Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., "Common Grace."

same. (Besides, this book is *not* an academic piece, but more or less the thoughts, ideas, and meanderings of a dude sitting in a coffee shop in Portland.) This definition gets at the heart of what Paul was speaking about to the misguided inhabitants of Lystra as well as what Jesus was mentioning on his famous Sermon on the Mount, namely that God is a loving creator who not only lovingly cares for and sustains his creation, but who does so regardless of whether people respond in love and worship him in return.

Further down in the Wikipedia article the contributor highlights the "Providential blessings to mankind" that are related to the outworking of common grace:

> Providential blessings to mankind–*Human advancements* that come through the unredeemed are seen as outcomes of God's common grace. For example, medical and other *technological advancements* that *improve the lives* of both the redeemed and unredeemed are seen as initiated by common grace.

> In summary, common grace is seen in God's continuing care for his creation, his restraining human society from becoming altogether intolerable and ungovernable, his *making it possible for mankind to live together in a generally orderly and cooperative manner*, and maintaining man's conscious sense of basic right and wrong behavior.[5]

Notice the various phrases that I italicized in the quote above ... *human advancements ... technological advancements ... improve the lives ... making it possible for mankind to live together in a generally orderly and cooperative manner.* These

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[5] Ibid. Italics mine.

sound much more comprehensive and larger in scope and detail than simply measuring annual rainfall (although it certainly includes that as well). Can we then make a collective leap of logic and link good urban design with common grace? If so, if good urban design then is part of the outworking of God's loving common grace, then how does that impact and influence how we view cities as well as our role in them individually and as the church? Let's dissect this quote and the phrases I italicized.

Human Advancements

David W. Smith in his book *Seeking a City With Foundations* compares and contrasts the two common views of the city held by Christians:

> What we have briefly sketched here are the two ends of a spectrum of approaches to the understanding of the urban process:
>
> the city is the concrete expression of the human fall from grace, a physical embodiment of man's independence and alienation and an environment that undermines community and create lonely people
>
> *or*
>
> it is the instrument of human liberation, opening up previously unknown possibilities of freedom and creativity and promising the arrival of the kingdom of God on earth, or of utopia.[6]

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[6] Smith, *Seeking a City With Foundations*, 23.

While most throughout recent history having certainly leaned towards the first, the reality is that *both* are true. Even in the storyline of various cities we can certainly note that a city can vacillate between one end of the spectrum and the other. We can also make the case or argument that cities most often straddle the line and hold in tension the present realities of both within the same context. Cities that are lauded as livable, creative, sustainable, and economically strong can simultaneously be fraught with social or housing disparities, economic exclusion, systemic racism, and more. Conversely, we can think of many cities that are presently defined by deep-seated corruption, violence, poor quality of life, and a weak economy. But can we at least begin positing that cities hold the *potential* for the best opportunities for human advancement?

I have quoted Edward Glaeser frequently in previous writings including this quote: "Cities aren't full of poor people because cities make people poor, but because cities *attract* poor people with the prospect of improving their lot in life."[7] Glaeser asserts that while they may not appear all neat and tidy cities are actually working to help promote human advancement. People move to cities because cities *do work*. That is not to be dismissive of the state of abject poverty, corruption, abuse of power, deplorable living conditions, and the like. But the point is that people *are* moving to cities because they provide the best opportunity for human advancement. Humans are incredibly pragmatic and we will gravitate towards places where we have the best

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[7] Glaeser, *Triumph of the City*, 70.

opportunity not only for survival but to thrive. This is why cities work and we migrate to them en masse because they house the greatest potential for our advancement and prosperity.

Again, this reaffirms the idea that cities are gifts of common grace because they have been proven to help people get a leg up in life ... or at least they hold this potential. This is not to suggest that if people would simply move to the city they'd be catapulted automatically into the middle-class or beyond. But there is no denying the *potential* of this happening is a powerful magnet. Conversely, Glaeser goes on to note, "Indeed, we should worry more about places with too little poverty. Why do they fail to attract the least fortunate?"[8] This strikes a familiar chord with Psalm 107: "Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to a city to dwell in; hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way till they reached a city to dwell in."[9]

Technological Advancements

In my book *The Urbanity of the Bible* I state that "The pinnacle of God's creation was indeed humanity. Part of being made in the image of God means that God also has endowed us with the ability to create and be creative."[10] Joel

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[8] Ibid., 71.

[9] Psalm 107: 4-7.

[10] Benesh, *The Urbanity of the Bible*. (pre-published)

Kotkin takes that thought a step further: "Humankind's greatest creation has always been its cities."[11] There is a progression at play here. God creates humanity *imago Dei* and endows us with creative genius. In turn, at the pinnacle of any creative venture that we have made since then is the city. The city, you see, is not simply a mere invention like a wheel or a hammer. It is not only chief among our own technological advancements, it has been simultaneously the incubator for new and expansive creative endeavors since then. Look at mobility. Why do we have cars, bicycles, subways, buses, hybrid cars, and streetcars? To move city dwellers around. Necessity is the mother of invention, and in the context of the city necessity is all around us. Life in the city forces us to imagine better ways in which we can live in these settings as well as to imagine how to make life more sustainable, healthy, helpful, accessible, and more.

It is *because* we live in cities that technological advancements occur. Light bulbs, air travel, sewer systems, intricate underground subway routes and tunnels, breathtaking skyscrapers, museums, art galleries, and especially in places like Portland, an explosion of creative food fusions and how the end-products are delivered ... by food carts, bike, brick and mortar, etc. If we didn't live in cities would there really be the impetus for cars, mass transit, massive high-tech sports stadiums, entertainment districts, arts districts, mixed-use housing, or manufacturing zones?

That one decision by God to create humanity in his image is in and of itself an outpouring of common grace, by

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11 Kotkin, *The City*, xx.

which through our creative genius we are able to make life a lot more comfortable, enjoyable, and livable. Sure, with that same creative genius we can make bombs and come up with creative ways to kill one another. But as cities grow, innovation happens, new ideas are incubated, and we figure out the best ways to remedy what plagues humanity. We have the cure for thousands of diseases or illnesses that once killed entire populations, we learned the benefits of clean water and sanitation, and more. We now have such a high standard of living that many of our complaints now are not about where we are going to kill our next rabbit, but instead if the wifi is spotty or too slow. Call it *First World Problems* but these advancements continue to sweep across the globe improving the lives of urban dwellers.

This is common grace at work.

Improve the Lives (Human Flourishing)

Building off this idea that an outcome of common grace is technological advancement is the idea that this same grace leads humanity towards human flourishing. Since this flourishing happens most intensely in cities we see the direct correlation. Cities are gifts of common grace that although still marred by sin, still offer the best places for our lives to improve and flourish. This begs the question as to what is meant by a "good city." If cities are part of, or gifts of, common grace and directly or indirectly part of God's blessing and care, then it is essential to begin creating a framework for what makes a city good and promotes human flourishing. Those both inside and outside the church have

tackled (and are tackling) this conversation. John Friedmann in *Insurgencies* writes, "I set out to construct a more elaborate image of what the 'good city' might be."[12] This too highlights the tension because maybe the first question we need to ask is ... what *is* a good city? What makes this an essential question is that there seems to be a direct correlation between a good city and a city that improves the lives of those who live there. But then again that raises the question ... what does it means for cities to improve the lives of those who call the city home?

Studying urban planning in developing nations is an exercise in recognizing our own cultural biases and blind spots. Whether we're talking about struggling cities like Lagos, Nigeria, or the squatter settlements of Mumbai or Mexico City, for those of us in the West (Western Europe and North America) it is easy to inject our own values, assumptions, and even definitions of what we mean by a "good city." For a resident of Lagos compared to a resident of Sibiu, Romania, in contrast to South Tucson, Arizona, or Portland, Oregon, or Tehran, Iran or Dhaka, Bangladesh, defining a "good city" (or a "civil society") is not as easy as one might think. Where this becomes even more problematic is when attempts are made to introduce corrective measures in developing countries by those with power and affluence in the West. While a Brit or an American may have good intentions in wanting to help Lagos prosper, they oftentimes are working on the assumptions or definitions of a good city (or a civil society)

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[12] Friedmann, *Insurgencies*, 145.

that would make sense in the West, but which may not translate elsewhere. As Lewis notes, "some researchers suggest instead that the concept of a civil society really has little meaning outside the contexts of Western Europe and North America."[13]

My reason for this detour into kicking the tires of what constitutes a good city or a civil society is because we must be careful when we talk about those topics in light of common grace. If we live in a squeaky clean (almost sterile) urban landscape such as False Creek in Vancouver, BC, we may look at other global cities in disdain with their *chaordic* urban planning, hopscotch architecture, and seemingly messy traffic flows. But in reality one can make the case that *both* are good cities (even though I am writing in broad generalities) because there is no universal definition of what makes a city good. Yet still we pine for a good city whether in North America or elsewhere. "A century during which the vast majority of the world's population will have to live in urban environments cries out for images of the good city."[14]

Friedmann drives this point home in not only our longing for a good city, but in interpreting where and how common grace is at work in a city pushing it in this direction. "Before proceeding, however, some preliminaries must be considered. First, in setting out an account of the good city, whose city are we talking about? Can we legitimately assume the possibility of a 'common good' for the city? Second, are we concerned only with the process or

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[13] Lewis, "Civil Society in African Contexts," 576.

[14] *Insurgencies*, 149.

only with outcomes, or should outcome and process be considered jointly?"[15] If one of the tenets of common grace is human flourishing, then we must consider thoughtfully what we mean by a good city. This is not a conversation solely reserved for urban planners and developers. As Tim Keller points out, "We teach Christians to integrate their faith and their work so they can be culture makers, working for human flourishing—the common good."[16] We must as well "use the resources of the church to seek a great, flourishing city."[17]

Making it Possible for Mankind [Humanity] to Live Together in a Generally Orderly and Cooperative Manner

This final tenet of the parameters of common grace in the context of cities focuses on people living harmoniously. This is not a plea for some Amish utopia where everyone lives placid lives with pasted-on smiles and firm, honest handshakes. This is not the *Truman Show* where everything is scripted, sterile, and perfect. Living harmoniously is not about the absence of conflict or tension, but instead about open and honest communication, conflict resolution, and tolerance in the truest sense of the word. As a matter of fact, as Richard Florida points out, the most culturally and economically vibrant cities are those that tend to be the most

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[15] Ibid.

[16] Keller, *Center Church*, loc.1069.

[17] Ibid., loc. 4819.

tolerant. "Creative people power regional economic growth, and these people prefer places that are innovative, diverse, and *tolerant*."[18]

How can cities be so tolerant and harmonious when oftentimes the church is not? Instead the church acts like a pugilist picking fights with culture and different subcultures within a city. I have heard countless stories of people at the receiving end of this berating move into tolerant cities and neighborhoods to *get away* from combative evangelicals. We have gay friends who moved into inner-city neighborhoods to get away from critical and judgmental suburban evangelicals. Is God's common grace at times at work in cities *regardless* of how the church functions, acts, and responds? Wright correctly asserts, "The dynamic action of the kingdom of God in the words and deeds of Jesus and the mission of his disciples changed lives, values and priorities, and presented a radical challenge to the *fallen structures of power in society*."[19] In tolerant cities the church is viewed as that fallen structure of power.

I understand that we have been misunderstood since the church's inception in the first century. We have been called incestuous (we refer to one another as brothers and sisters), cannibals (we claim to eat of the flesh of Christ and drink his blood when we take communion), and we refuse to bow to the gods of the age whether Zeus, Caesar, or money. I get that, and that despite the tension and conflict we are to rightly submit ourselves to the Lordship of Christ regardless

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18 Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class*, 34. Italics mine.

19 Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 42.

of the cost. With that said, Jesus reserved his harshest criticisms at the religious establishment and instead hung out with sinners, the lowly and despised. We have somehow flip-flopped this and assume we're doing "God's work" when we fight with culture and denigrate people. Is that common grace let alone saving grace?

The presence of God's common grace makes it possible for people to live together in a generally orderly and cooperative manner. We are still fallen, we still sin (both Christians and others), and there certainly is the reality of corrupt individuals, whether they be ruthless dictators, greedy politicians, or fomenters of interracial conflict. I believe common grace is present; otherwise the whole world would eat itself.

Again, we have a long history of xenophobia, genocide, and the slaughtering of millions. We can resist God's ways and his precepts, but in the end our resistance does *us* harm. Societies can choose whether or not to live by a "moral code" which I would assert, and Scripture backs me up on this, is the work of the common and prevenient grace that God has written on our hearts. While we all have this "internal moral compass" that is divine in origin, we are still capable of neglecting that moral judgment. We see this on a daily basis in our own lives when we disregard our own better judgment and unfairly criticize someone. Or on a larger scale, it could be a country's dictator engaging in the systematic ethnic cleansing of a minority group.

Now that we have explored the various facets of common grace I can return to the question I posed above: *If good urban design is part of the outworking of God's loving*

common grace, then how does that impact and influence how we view cities as well as our role in them individually and as the church? It is time to begin linking together good urban design with common grace. Even more fundamentally, if good (wholesome, helpful, healthy) urban design is a mark of common grace then we must also conclude that it originates with God.

Chapter 3

The Heart of the Divine Urban Planner

The foundation of a just and equitable city is found in the very nature of God himself; it flows out of who God is. It follows then that good urban design is an expression of God's character and nature for the benefit of humanity, the pinnacle of his creation. That said, I believe most people do not link these two together ... *good urban design* and *God*. Why is that?

As history progresses and as time unfolds, one thing is certain, that for Christians our eternity has an address, the city. Eric Jacobsen in *Sidewalks in the Kingdom* takes this thought a step further:

> As Christians, we are familiar with the idea that "our citizenship is in heaven." We have understood this to mean that our allegiance to this world is tempered by the fact that there is another place called heaven, which will provide the setting for our eternal existence. Taking the model of New Jerusalem seriously means that we have to also take seriously the idea that in heaven we will be "citi-zens," or denizens of the city. Whatever else that might mean, it at least means *that to be a Christian*

> *means to be a city person*. We may like or dislike particular
> cities, but we cannot despise the city itself.[1]

There are many implications we can draw from this as to
how Christians are to be "citi-zens" and that we are not to
despise cities, especially since that is what eternity will look
like. However, what is notable in terms of the present
context is what Jacobsen subtly infers and understands to be
true. Who designed the New Jerusalem? Who was its
architect and urban planner? God. Len Hjalmarson in *No
Home Like Place* writes, "Cities are enormous factories of
culture, culture in turn forms us into certain kinds of people.
Still more, cities generate *cruciality*: there are crucibles for
change more than any other environments."[2] Do we believe
that God would simply leave the most influential invention
in all of human history to happenstance with little to no
divine interaction, intention, or influence?

In John 14 Jesus reveals that God is building something.
"'Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe
also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were
not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for
you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come
again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may
be also. And you know the way to where I am going.'"[3] We
understand clearly (and rightly so!) that God is the Creator
and Sustainer of all things. Usually in our default mode

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[1] Jacobsen, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom*, 43. Italics mine.

[2] Hjalmarson, *No Home Like Place*, 154.

[3] John 14:1-4.

when we speak of God's creation we exclusively refer to the wilderness ... rural areas ... the cosmos ... plants ... animals ... grand canyons and painted deserts ... alpine meadows ... exotic and lush jungles ... oceans teeming with life. But cities, buildings, houses? Not so much. Many still contend that God created the wilderness and it was good and wholesome while man created cities to get away from God's presence, and as a result cities are dens of wickedness. But obviously God has been and is building something ... houses, buildings, and cities.

The writer of Hebrews points out that what we know about the construction of the tabernacle in the wilderness would later be reflected in the construction of the temple in Jerusalem. Who drafted the blueprints? God did. He then sent these plans to Moses and Solomon (in his case, by virtue of endowing him with wisdom). They in turn acted as general contractors who subcontracted out the construction process. "For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, 'See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.'"[4]

So what we find is that since before time began God was doing more than plotting out canyons and the shorelines that would hold in the world's oceans. He was also drafting plans for buildings ... and then cities. God is a God of cities as much as he is of the wilderness and never-ending cosmos. How then does God's nature or character shape what he designs?

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[4] Hebrew 8:5.

New York City pastor Timothy Keller in his book *Generous Justice* asserts, "Most people know that Jesus came to bring forgiveness and grace. Less well known is the Biblical teaching that a true experience of the grace of Jesus Christ inevitably motivates a man or woman to seek justice in the world."[5] One of the premises that Keller explores is this notion that justice is not only an outflow of who God is and his character, but there is a trickle-down effect, that those who love and follow God are likewise to seek justice.

Keller points out that not only does justice originate in God but it is his character as well. In other words, justice is who God is, which in turn underscores his concern for the poor, the vulnerable, the marginalized, the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner. Keep this in mind for when we later explore urban design. As God called out and established the nation of Israel when he freed them from captivity in Egypt, he gave them explicit instructions about how they were to function as a society:

> Israel was charged to create a culture of social justice for the poor and vulnerable because it was the way the nation could reveal God's glory and character to the world. Deuteronomy 4:6-8 is a key text where Israel is told that they should keep God's commands so that all the nations of the world will look at the justice and peace of their society, based on God's laws, and be attracted to God's wisdom and glory.[6]

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[5] Keller, *Generous Justice*, ix.

[6] Ibid., 9.

This theme can be traced throughout the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures (or Old Testament) as various judges and prophets continuously called the wayward nation back to loving and worshipping God, and following the commands of the Torah. Whenever the nation wandered away from God, injustices cropped up.

We see this repeatedly today in the built environment when injustice creeps into brutalist or bad urban design that has a detrimental impact on city dwellers. When Israel fell into idol worship, their love, concern, and care for the poor also faded. Micah is one example of a prophet calling the nation back to its roots:

> With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?[7]

The prophet Isaiah also writes in a similar vein, "learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause."[8] Do we ever make the connection between these commands and urban design?

The key point in these ancient prophetic pronouncements is that God was not only interested in

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[7] Micah 6:6-8.

[8] Isaiah 1:17.

spiritual faithfulness. The direct correlation between spiritual idolatry and oppression means that when God was calling his people back to himself, he was also calling out for a return to justice and equity. "The implications of this accusation are clear. Justice is not just one more thing that needs to be added to the people's portfolio of religious behavior. A lack of justice is a sign that the worshippers' hearts are not right with God at all, that their prayers and all their religious observances are just filled with self and pride."[9]

"If God's character includes a zeal for justice that leads him to have the tenderest love and closest involvement with the socially weak, then what should God's people be like?"[10] It can be argued that this same ethic and theological framework was woven into the DNA of the early church and throughout the centuries. (Later we'll make connect this to the church's role in urban planning and architecture). This does not minimize the presence of corruption and fallenness in the church because it had drifted away from the Gospel, and those times when it was (and is) errant. But that does not take away from the initial call of God that we be a people marked by grace and justice. Again, this is an outflow of God's character and therefore ought to be imbedded in the lives of those who claim to love and follow God.

But did Jesus continue in the same thread as the Hebrew Scriptures and God's call for justice? "And Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the

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[9] *Generous Justice*, 50.

[10] Ibid., 8.

blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.'"[11] Keller writes, "Here is the same care for the vulnerable that characterizes the heart of God. While clearly Jesus was preaching the good news to all, he showed throughout his ministry the particular interest in the poor and the downtrodden that God has always had."[12]

Justice is the overflow of a life that has experienced grace. This propels (or should propel) Christians to choose to engage the city and all of the various ills that plague urban life. As the church enters into dialogue and action within the city, it is forced to refine its theology about the nature of the city. Elaine Graham and Stephen Lowe write in *What Makes a Good City? Public Theology and the Urban Church* that "the development of Christian doctrine has been shaped by the opportunities and challenges of urban living as it has been presented to every generation."[13] What this means is that belief becomes translated into movement and action ... and design.

But how should the church respond? What does it mean for Christians to be involved in renewing the city even in the midst of a culture and context where most of its inhabitants do not share the same belief system? This is where Graham and Lowe's book becomes crucial because they show that

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[11] Matthew 11:4-6.

[12] *Generous Justice*, 44.

[13] Graham and Lowe, *What Makes a Good City?*, 1.

theology is not reserved simply for life within the church, but instead it spills out into all facets of city life as the church engages in renewal.

This theological ethic is what influenced the early church and influenced Christian thinkers throughout the centuries. Augustine, writing in the fifth century while the barbarians were ransacking Rome, called the church to engage in urban life. "Augustine argued that Christians must not abandon the challenge of living in the world as it is, even while they live in anticipation of the world to come."[14] It is this theology that propels churches today into action. As Graham and Lowe note, "While churches are far from perfect, our thesis has been that they are nowhere as detached from normality as critics contend—on the contrary, the closer one gets to ground level, the more impressive and effective the local church appears."[15]

This notion that justice embraces the very nature of God means that on the physical, urban-design, built-environment, or urban-planning level, when we see good and helpful designs that benefit urban inhabitants, the city is moving closer to the heart and nature of God. We cannot divorce God's character from urban design. As was noted above, whenever God's people moved away from faithfulness towards God and into idolatry, injustices crept in and plagued society. Why then do today's secular cities house some of the best and most helpful features of urban form? This is where we hold to the doctrine of common grace,

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[14] Ibid., 19.

[15] Ibid., 129.

namely that God still loves and cares for a rebellious humanity regardless of whether we reciprocate in love and worship or not.

Impact of Good Urban Design

Urban design, whether helpful or harmful, impacts the lives of city dwellers more than we may realize. This is a power wielded by corporations, city officials, developers, and more. Charles Montgomery points out an example from Midtown Manhattan. "In 1961 the city enacted a well-meaning ordinance granting developers the right to build higher towers in exchange for building public plazas on their property."[16] That sounds like a good thing, right? Instead the developers *purposely* designed these plazas to be so unpleasant that people would not want to use them nor linger there. "By 2000, more than half of the bonus plaza buildings in Midtown and the Financial District either did not attract people or actively repelled them. *This was exactly their intent*."[17] Purposefully bad design—painful seating, odd edges, sunken areas, inaccessible spaces, and so forth—compelled people not to socialize.[18]

Conversely, good urban design is not only helpful, but it creates new habits and brings people together. As legendary sociologist and journalist William Whyte notes, "A good new space builds a new constituency. It gets people into new

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[16] Montgomery, *Happy City*, loc. 2485.

[17] Ibid., loc. 2501. Italics mine.

[18] Ibid.

habits—such as alfresco lunches—and induces them to use new paths … The best-used places are sociable places, with a higher proportion of couples and groups than you will find in less-used places."[19]

The power of spaces, whether for good or for bad, directly impacts how people live and function in the city, how people engage with one another (if they do), and even how happy people are in the city. This is why one of the early appeals of suburbanization was as an escape from the raw, crowded, unsavory living conditions that plagued the industrial cities. But then suburbia took on a life of its own which has created a whole new litany of injustices and ill health.

Montgomery points out that "Anyone serious about exploring how modern cities influence happiness has got to start by looking clearly at the landscape to which we have devoted the vast majority of our resources over the last half century."[20] In a word, the suburbs. Montgomery makes a connection between the shape or design of cities and the happiness or well-being of people.

> But there is a clear connection between this social deficit [a shrinking social support network] and the shape of cities. A Swedish study found that people who endure more than a forty-five-minute commute were 40 percent more likely to divorce. People who live in monofunctional, car-dependent neighborhoods outside of urban centers are much less trusting of other people

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[19] Whyte, "The Design of Spaces," 512.

[20] *Happy City,* loc. 666.

than people who live in walkable neighborhoods where housing is mixed with shops, services, and places to work.[21]

What does this mean then that throughout most of the twentieth century churches migrated en masse to the sprawling suburbs, and that through bad urban design and commuting patterns only accentuated what was and is broken about this form of the built environment?

Good Urban Design Originates with God

It is not really a stretch to articulate the notion that good urban design actually does originate with God. Obviously this does not mean he is beholden to our own design standards, guidelines, and codebooks; nor can we squeeze him into the mold of a New Urbanist, guerrilla or tactical urbanist, modernist, or the equivalent of some dude in the wilderness felling trees to make his own rustic cabin. But God designs. He plans. He has blueprints. He builds. He doesn't simply draft renderings for a building or moveable dwelling place like the post-Exodus tabernacle (which he did), but we find is that he actually has built (or will build ... it is that whole time continuum thing in writing about a God who is not bound by time or eternity) a city. A city. Streets, plazas, gates, marketplaces, homes, expensive accents (gold and precious jewels), and the thoughtful integration of green infrastructure (a flowing river bisecting

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[21] Ibid., loc. 839.

a street through the city and tree of life that straddles it). Jacobsen in *The Space Between* points out:

> The most important evidence for the importance of the built environment for Christians comes at the end of the story. In John's vision of the coming reign of Christ, he is given an evocative picture of our lives when our relationship is fully restored. And that picture is not of a garden or wilderness, but of a city. The story of the Bible, then, provides an important reminder that whatever we may think of it, the built environment will be an important and inescapable aspect of our future.[22]

However, like I mentioned above, we cannot be tight-fisted about the specifics of connecting together *good urban design* and *God* because we're not privileged to many of the precise details. With that said, we *can* continue to pull together enough disparate pieces to make the case that wherever we *do* find helpful, healthy, happy, inclusive, connecting, and sociable spaces we can boldly make the case of God's love, intention, and care at work through his common grace. In other words, we certainly *can* make the connection between God and good urban design. That is to say, ultimately God is the author of good, helpful, hopeful, and healthy urban design because it is an outflow of not only his common grace, but his character (justness) as well.

Over the last number of years many books have been written and extensive social commentaries have been penned concerning the concept of a *Third Place*. It has become so interwoven into our vocabulary inside the church and out,

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[22] Jacobsen, *The Space Between*, 18.

that I do not feel the need to write a treatise on it here. However, for the sake of this conversation and the points I am articulating, I will at least lay a baseline foundation of the concept so that we have a mutual starting point, especially as I begin unpacking it in the context of urban design. In a nutshell a "third place" is that "in-between" space of *where* we live our lives between our homes (*first place*) and work (*second place*). Michael Carpenter, an urban church planter in North Little Rock, Arkansas, launched a new third place called Mug's Cafe as a way to tap into the ethos of third places. He writes, "A third place is a public setting that hosts regular, voluntary, and informal gatherings of people. Third places are where people hang out, relax, and have the opportunity to know and be known by others. At their core, they are places where people feel at home."[23]

My dream for years has been to live in an urban loft that sits above a cool, trendy coffee shop. It began back in the days when we lived in Tucson. If I remember correctly I mentioned something like that in my book *Metrospiritual* except that coffee shop was a Starbucks.[24] Thankfully since then the Third Wave Coffee movement has supplanted the coffee giant and relegated it to the backseat of coffee quality as local artisan roasters are tweaking, experimenting, and mastering the fine art of small-batch roasting. So my dream has evolved. When we moved into our current mixed-use building in the Hollywood District of central city Portland

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[23] Carpenter, "Church Planting in Gentrifying Neighborhoods. Part 1: Church at Argenta (Little Rock, AR)," loc. 2886

[24] "My only request is that I would live in a chic loft atop a Starbucks and an REI." Benesh, *Metrospiritual*, loc. 3630.

several facets of my "dream" started lining up. While it is an apartment and not a chic loft per se (and we're a family of five living in a two-bedroom 950 square foot unit) there is much about it that we absolutely love. We sit above a busy branch of the Multnomah public library and next to the entrance of that (precisely four floors below our unit) was a nondescript coffee shop. I won't belabor the obvious, but in a two-and-a-half-year span I only visited there *once*. I pedaled elsewhere for good quality coffee and an atmosphere that I enjoyed, but that all changed literally just yesterday.

The old coffee shop owner had sold the business and retired while a young energetic owner took the reins, redesigned the space, and the clincher is that they now offer Ristretto Roaster coffee. Just this week Ristretto (along with Heart Coffee which is my other hang-out spot) made the list of the 21 Best Coffee Shops in America.[25] Today I am here at the new coffee shop four floors below us ... Rust Coffee Lounge. In their first two days of operation I visited and hung out more than I had in the previous two and a half years. What changed? Simple. Apart from bringing in high-quality coffee they redesigned the space which has *changed everything*. Now let me unpack that last statement.

Most of the time when we talk or write about third places we usually default to explaining the social dynamics of these spots. People connect informally and live out life in this "middle area" between home and work, whether it's a pub, coffee shop, pool hall, lounge, gym, etc. However, little attention is paid to exploring *why* these places work in terms

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[25] http://www.thrillist.com/eat/nation/best-coffee-shops-in-america-best-coffee-shop-in-the-country.

of the built environment that *shapes* the sociability of how they are used. In other words, why do some spaces work better at creating third places more than others? To be fair, the previous coffee shop was always hopping since its entrance is only feet away from the doors of the library which at one point, as I recall, was the busiest library branch in the country. However, bad coffee, drab decor, and uncomfortable seating kept me at bay and I simply refused to go there. But in a ten-day span the new owners closed shop and did some extensive renovations and upgrades. As soon as they opened I walked in and was amazed at not only the changes, but the thought process behind it. So I parked my laptop in the corner and as I worked I simply watched people.

I noted traffic flows, how people approach this space, how interactions take place, and how it is all juxtaposed with not only the library entrance, but the bustling street intersection that has a considerable amount of pedestrian and bicycle traffic. Within the past year another four-story apartment building opened across the street from the entrance of the library / coffee shop so now all of the dynamics are considerably different as there is a density that leads to vibrancy and an activating streetscape. As I was sitting there I happily looked up to see two of my smiling sons walking in towards me. They just got out of school and they knew I was there in the coffee shop working. It struck me how the space all of a sudden felt like an extension of our living room. They chatted briefly before heading home upstairs. Immediately a quote from Jacobsen reverberated in my mind: "The advantage that cities and traditional

neighborhoods have over sprawling suburbs with respect to interdependence is that they allow people of greater variety of ages to participate meaningfully in the culture."[26]

I think of life in our neighborhood and building. Jacobsen's quote is an everyday reality. On the elevator or in the hallways we daily interact with people of all ages. Everyone knows my family and we know everyone else … not all of their names, but all of their faces. Talk is pleasant and informal. My boys have the run of the neighborhood whether walking over to McDonalds across the street to get a McFlurry or a movie at Redbox, candy at Rite Aid, or the daily ritual of taking our dog through the neighborhood for his regular walks. Or we'll walk across the street the other way to go to VeloCult bike shop either to hang out, meet a friend for coffee, attend an event, or actually buy a bike part. So what facilitates this whole experience including these various third places? The *built environment*.

Not that it was even intentionally planned this way, but the variety of housing, incomes, businesses, and such all housed within a few blocks of our home has created an atmosphere that facilitates connections and deeper relationships. My wife's closest friends are other women in our building. Proximity creates opportunity for further connection and depth … the unintentional or regular incidental contacts.

If God was and is all about this notion of human flourishing then we must at least have a conversation about what kinds of *places* facilitate the best possible ways for this

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[26] *Sidewalks in the Kingdom*, 26.

to take place. Not just cities because of their density and proximity, but the *right* kind of places whether they are formally planned or grew up organically. Chuck Wolfe calls this "urbanism without effort." "'Urbanism without effort' is what happens naturally when people congregate in cities—based on the innate interactions of urban dwellers that occur with one another and the surrounding urban and physical environment."[27]

Linking together the concept of God being the ultimate divine urban planner with the quality, vitality, and health of places is not as obscure or difficult as one may surmise. God is behind the flourishing of humanity which means the proliferation of culture. Again, most often when we talk about culture we do so in absence of the built environment. But culture and the built environment are inseparable. "The living of our lives is not only shaped *by* but also *shapes* the built environment."[28] I am convinced that human flourishing is directly tied into the quality of place and the built environment. Woven into the creation and growth of cities is the notion that they were created for human flourishing despite being marred by sin. "The city becomes one instrument to provide the stability of law and order for which we pine, the symbol and carrier of the social and cultural continuity we now call civilization."[29] This necessitates good urban design. Good urban design originates in God. God is an urban planner.

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[27] Wolfe, *Urbanism Without Effort*, loc. 123.

[28] *The Space Between*, 25.

[29] Conn and Ortiz, *Urban Ministry*, 221.

Chapter 4

The Site and Situation of a Just City
Part 1

If our assertion is correct that God is the first and foremost urban planner who cares deeply about the impact of the built environment of cities, then we should be able to uncover some semblance of these blueprints, renderings, or actual construction projects in Scripture. Again, for many God is merely a horticulturalist arranging the elements of the "natural" world while cities represent a sinful aberration of what God had intended. Through the continued process of urbanization that began in Genesis 4 we know that we have tipped the scales: today's global citizens *are* city dwellers. Holding to the theological truth of God's sovereignty we would be remiss if we somehow concluded that cities, whether small-scale walled cities from antiquity or today's megacities in east Asia, have somehow escaped God's notice. That is not to say that everything housed within our cities today from design to local economies to healthcare to education are not tainted and impacted by both individual and systemic sin. But we also can affirm the twin realities of God's common grace and the presence of the

Holy Spirit keeping us from completely annihilating one another.

If we were to somehow uncover renderings or blueprints of a just city what would we find? The challenge comes in how culturally biased and nuanced this conversation really is. To define a just city, or at least its implementation, would vary greatly from Bogotá to Dubai to Addis Ababa to Jakarta to Munich. It certainly is a conversation where New Urbanists in North America would *not* have the final say. While there certainly would be some commonalities, and different facets of these blueprints or designs that would overlap, it is not as easy a task as one might assume. For Americans, especially those in traffic-plagued cities like Los Angeles, Phoenix, or Atlanta, a just city (in their minds) might mean even more expansive elevated freeways and shorter work commute times. In sharp contrast, in the slums of Bogotá on the Alameda El Porvenir,[1] instead of paving this former dirt road for use by cars, a paved promenade down the center of the road is reserved for pedestrians and bicyclists. "Usually, the first thing that poor cities do to improve dirt roads is to lay a strip of asphalt down the middle so cars can barrel though. This was different. A wide runway of concrete and tile ran down the middle, but it had been raised knee-high to prevent cars from gaining access. The result: a grand promenade reserved exclusively for pedestrians and cyclists."[2] Car commuters in LA would be

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[1] A 17-kilometer long pedestrian avenue through the poorest neighborhoods in Bogotá.

[2] Montgomery, *Happy City*, loc. 3476.

appalled … giving preferential treatment to those who *don't* drive? Also, in Bogotá the bus system (TransMilenio) claims the best road space in the city while many of us up north view buses completely differently … "a bus—just the low status ride that North Americans love to hate."[3] So how will we truly know a just city when we find one?

Former Bogotá mayor Enrique Peñalosa comments, "We think it's totally normal in developing-country cities that we spend billions of dollars building elevated highways while people don't have schools, they don't have sewers, they don't have parks. And we think this is progress, and we show this with pride, these elevated highways!"[4] In other words, before we dive deep into Scripture seeking to uncover the blueprints of a just city it would be helpful if we address this theme for a little bit. If not, *your* definition and view of a just city will differ from *mine* which will differ from a city dweller in Bogotá or Cedar Rapids, Iowa, or Buenos Aires. The last thing we want to do is let our own cultural blind spots dictate what a just city is or else we will end up reading it back into Scripture in our hunt for biblical motifs or examples of the kind of city that originates in God himself. Let's look at an example of the development of a global megacity and begin thinking through what its implications for a just city look like.

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[3] Ibid., loc. 3443.

[4] Ibid., loc. 3557.

Finding a Just City in Mexico

Mexico City was founded by the Aztecs in 1325 on an island of Lake Texcoco under the name Tenochtitlan. By the late 1400s the population had already swelled to 200,000-300,000 people.[5] Tenochtitlan was the largest city in the western hemisphere by 1519 and "comparable to great cities anywhere in the world."[6] Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés conquered the city in 1521. In letters he wrote to the king of Spain, Cortés noted that "The city is as large as Seville or Cordova; its streets, I speak of the principal ones, are very wide and straight."[7] Through conquest and the introduction of smallpox, most of its population was decimated. Cortés and his army razed much of the city and then proceeded to rebuild it erasing much of the Aztec past.[8]

By 1585 Tenochtitlan became known as Ciudad de México (Mexico City) which "emerged as a beautiful capital of the Spanish colony of New Spain. It was modeled after a typical Spanish city with a cathedral and government building encircling a public square."[9] This style employed the use of broad straight streets. "The 16th century saw a proliferation of churches, many of which can still be seen

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[5] Flanagan, *Urban Sociology*, 43.

[6] Phillips, *City Lights*, 125.

[7] Gottdiener and Hutchinson, *The New Urban Sociology*, 36.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Geography of World Urbanization Class, "Mexico City, Mexico."

today in the historic center."[10] Development followed a grid pattern.

In the 19th century the city was divided into subdivisions for investors and residents of differing incomes. Under French rule, Mexico City, led by Austrian-born monarch, Maximillian, built the Paseo de la Reforma. "Urban historians often describe the planning and building of the Paseo de la Reforma (1864), the major road in Mexico City, as the first evidence of modern urban development to Mexico from Europe. The street was largely inspired by Parisian boulevards. By the late 1800s it was a popular location for elite housing."[11] Between the end of the 19th century and into the 20th, Mexico City's urban fabric changed significantly. Influenced by intellectuals who favored rational planning and development, Porifio Díaz sought to create the city in such a way as to attract international investors. As a result, 15,000 miles of railways, electric lines, and streetcars were built along with monumental buildings, commercial districts, and transportation networks.

The 20th century saw Mexico City grow rapidly. While the population in 1900 had remained virtually the same since 1519, that was soon to change. In the 1940s the population jumped to over 3 million people and by the 1980s the population was at about 14 million. With the rapid growth, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, there was little investment in infrastructure. Currently, best estimates place the population between 21 and 24 million people making it

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[10] Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., "Mexico City."

[11] "Mexico City, Mexico."

the largest city in the western hemisphere, the largest Spanish-speaking city in the world, and the third-largest agglomeration globally. The rapid growth, along with changing governments, has had an impact in the built environment of the city and urban planning. The history of Mexico City's development reveals that planning at times was influenced by European rational planning and development. It was also inherently technocratic.

Mexico City's recent history of rapid growth has become one of its defining characteristics in its approach to planning.

> As people poured into Mexico City, the government was unable to keep up with services and housing necessary for a rapidly expanding population. This led to the development of large, sprawling shantytowns on the outskirts of Mexico City, called barrios. These new developments lacked basic services—including water, sewer, and telephone––leading to health and environmental problems for people living in these communities.[12]

Urban planners simply could not keep up. The sad consequence is that, according to Mike Davis, 27 percent of the inner city and 73 percent of the rest of Mexico City are slum dwellers.[13]

Mexico City's longstanding tenure under Spanish colonial rule meant that a certain form of planning culture and framework became integrated into the life of the city.

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[12] World Savvy Monitor, "Mexico City Case Study."

[13] *City Lights*, 126.

This is explained in the UN-Habitat's document *Planning Sustainable Cities:*

> In Latin American cities, past colonial links played a role in transferring European planning ideas to this part of the world; but more general intellectual exchange did this as well. Latin American authorities of the republican consolidation era viewed major European cities as emblematic of modernity. Consequently, they undertook massive urban renewal projects in an effort to replicate European cities in the region.[14]

This was certainly true in Mexico City from the beginning when most of the Aztec buildings were razed and replaced with a Spanish European style of architecture and street design. Mexico City's Spanish-influenced past influenced how planning was done as it adopted a more European-style technocratic physical planning framework.

The Urban Realities of Modern-Day Mexico City

Mexico City's urban realities are reflective of many other cities in the developing countries of the Global South. "In poor countries, the populations of the largest cities sprawl outward, engulfing surrounding towns and countryside, and the skylines of city centers are transformed by the vertical glass and steel structures of the international style of architecture."[15] There is considerable wealth in Mexico City

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[14] UN-Habitat, *Planning Sustainable Cities*, 52.

[15] *Urban Sociology*, 161.

as it is the eighth most powerful economy in the world. Simultaneously, as mentioned above, it is a city with a high proportion of slum dwellers. This can be viewed as a negative or a positive. I quoted Glaeser earlier and what he said is worth repeating. "Cities aren't full of poor people because cities make poor people, but because cities *attract* poor people with the prospect of improving their lot in life."[16] He goes on to point out challenges that urban planners in Mexico City must address and realize: "The great urban poverty paradox is that if a city improves life for poor people currently living there by improving public schools or mass transit, that city will attract more poor people."[17]

Today, Mexico City is considered a significant global megacity. "Shanghai, Mexico City, Paris, Hong Kong, and a host of other cities now represent such centers."[18] The disparate realities of millions of slum dwellers coupled with the status of Mexico City housing the eighth most powerful economy in the world, makes the challenges and opportunities of urban planning even more prominent. It becomes equally challenging when trying to impose a biblical or theological framework upon this storyline, particularly in regards to what constitutes a just city. It is clear that Mexico's technocratic-planning past is not helpful in terms of it moving forward to address its current urban

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[16] Glaeser, *Triumph of the City*, 70.

[17] Ibid., 71.

[18] Orum and Chen, *The World of Cities*, 40.

crises of poverty and informal settlements as well as some of the worst pollution and traffic congestion in the world.

How do we begin pulling these disparate pieces together ... the just city, common grace, individual and systemic sin, good urban design, bad urban design and planning, and the lives of millions upon millions in this city who are all impacted by these realities? If we were to move towards creating a just city in such places as Mexico City what would that even look like? One thing is clear, though, the impact of design and planning *directly* influence and impact the lives of millions. Can the church conceive of or at least begin to entertain the notion that *one* of the practical ways to demonstrate God's love towards city dwellers just might include *how* people live in the city, *how* people move around, and *how* people interact with the built environment? In other words, what role does the church play in helping a city like Mexico City truly become a just city that reflects God's intention for human flourishing?

The Culture of Planning

The challenge facing Mexico City, as with many growing cities in the Global South, is that population growth has outpaced urban infrastructure. For Mexico City, this has meant growing squatter settlements on the urban periphery, massive pollution, and an urban infrastructure that is

accessible to mostly the middle class and the more affluent.[19] What role then do planners and the government play in these problematic features in this global city? And as I asked above, what role then does the church play in these problematic features? In an article comparing Mexico City and Los Angeles, Julia Cooke writes, "Government control over growth is minimal, which is where comparisons with Los Angeles' current situation diverge. Everyone acknowledges a dire need for stricter, enforced urban-planning regulations. Failure to enact new laws or implement old ones is due in large part to the separation of political entities that govern the metropolitan area."[20] This creates a paradox because on the one hand there has been a longstanding practice of technocratic planning while the rise of informal settlements reveals the limited reach and extent of planning.

This brings up the specific roles of urban planners who've been given the task of shaping and reshaping Mexico City. Can the church also enter into this conversation? Where? How? With explosive population growth, the government has had a difficult time in regulating their

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[19] "Because their lack of access to credit and low incomes force low-income families to seek land and housing in informal settlements, many of which are in the peripheral and only affordable locations, they are faced with long and costly journeys to work, often using informal public transport. A study found that 82 per cent of residents living in a peripheral and 69 per cent in a central informal settlement do not utilize formal transport networks to travel to work. Instead, roughly 39 per cent of residents in the former and 33 per cent in the latter rely on shared vans (*pesaros*) in which users pay for their portion of the journey to work." *Planning Sustainable Cities*, 138.

[20] Cooke, "Los Angeles and Mexico City," para. 4.

planning standards across the city. "In Mexico City, the diffused decision making and regulatory power make it easy for the working poor and developers, who build housing for Mexico's rising middle class, to bypass regulations."[21] I would add that squatter settlements are built by people bypassing or simply ignoring regulations. "'It's urban planning with many holes, that can be modified by corruption,' says Arturo Ortiz Struck, director of the MXDF Research Institute, a group composed of local architects."[22] Fernando Greene Castillo, a professor at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), writes, "The basic model for urban planning of Mexico City, deals with the definition of land uses in pieces of territory, considered as part of the region of analysis (neighborhood or counties)."[23] As to who leads these efforts, Castillo elsewhere notes, "The urban, architectural and engineering projects and constructions in public spaces are in charge of the City Government."[24]

The challenge of developing a framework through which to understand the planning culture and discourse in Mexico generally and in Mexico City specifically, is to be cognizant of the cultural differences. This also continues to influence and inform our parallel conversation of defining a

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[21] Ibid., para. 6.

[22] Ibid., para. 7.

[23] Castillo, "A Different Approach for Spatial Planning of the Tlalpan Delegation of Mexico City," 2.

[24] Castillo, "Urban Renewal of the N-W Area of the Historic Center and the Alameda Corridor of Mexico City," 2.

just city. Friedmann highlights this point: "If we were going to make ourselves understood in cross-cultural conversations about planning, we would have to be mindful of those differences."[25]   Mexico City, as we have seen from its historical development, has a vibrant past with some form of urban planning woven into its urban tapestry since the 1300s. Of course, when the city shifted from Aztec to Spanish to Mexican rule (and others in between) these various cultures influenced urban form. Colonialism stamped the city with a European technocratic approach to planning that focused on the spatial. Awareness of this cultural distinctive, as Friedmann has mentioned, also informs my own perspective as well. "This point of departure is perhaps not immediately obvious to American planners, many of whom are still fairly parochial in their thinking, having been nurtured in their own planning culture (and its language) with little knowledge of how planning is institutionalized and enacted beyond the borders of their own country or even city where they happen to be employed."[26]   Determining what is or what is not a just city is truly a global conversation and cannot be defined and led solely by those in the North and West.

Sorting through the cultural variances in planning prompted Friedmann to set out to define planning culture "as the ways, both formal and informal, that spatial planning in a given multi-national region, country or city is conceived,

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[25] Friedmann, *Insurgencies*, 164.

[26] Ibid., 165.

institutionalized, and enacted."[27] What this definition does is to open up the parameters to include the *whole* of planning culture in Mexico City whether government-led initiatives or impromptu, informal "guerrilla" planning.

Issues Influencing Urban Planning in Mexico City: Decentralization and Urban Regeneration

Planning actors across this megacity vary from numerous municipalities to the state or district government to the federal government.

> There are significant differences between the Federal District and the State of Mexico in terms of development policies. They have autonomous urban planning derived from different regulations and laws. The same occurs between municipalities, which maintain planning autonomy. There are generally no inter-municipal collaboration programs. The central area of the city concentrates industrial and services-sector employment, whereas the new housing developments are being built on the periphery. This adds to the problem, as the center concentrates employment, while housing sprawls relentlessly outward.[28]

[27] Ibid., 168.

[28] Metropolis, *Megacities*, 13.

Mexico City is experiencing some of the same issues[29] that plague cities in North America, namely the outward migration of manufacturing jobs which leaves inner-city neighborhoods more vulnerable to the adverse effects of fewer jobs on the country's largest university and major banks.[30] Middle class and high income families have also bolted for the newer suburbs.[31] This in turn created conditions and opportunities that are ripe for urban regeneration.

Like many industrial cities in North America, Mexico City is focusing its attention on urban regeneration projects. Urban planner Pablo Aboumrad said in *New York Magazine* in regards to the turnaround taking place in Mexico City's Centro neighborhood, "It's like a tornado passed and now everything is calm and clean."[32] This neighborhood was given a $382 million facelift.[33] The Federal District Public Space Authority is working hard to continue to help Mexico

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[29] "Foreign investment in offices, shopping malls, industry, residential development and leisure facilities is a key factor fueling further expansion." *Planning Sustainable Cities*, 137.

[30] "Urban Renewal of the N-W Area of the Historic Center and the Alameda Corridor of Mexico City," 1.

[31] "Another phenomenon with implications for municipal governance and planning in the region is the internal structure of urban areas. There has been an increasing relocation of population, industries and services from city centres to the periphery since the 1990s. This has contributed to low-density suburban growth, which, in turn, has escalated the cost of public infrastructure provision and service delivery." *Planning Sustainable Cities*, 29.

[32] Moon, "The Urbanist's Mexico City," para. 1.

[33] Ibid.

City reinvent itself to continue to not only be competitive globally and encourage more foreign investment, but to also mitigate environmental issues that plague the city. Some of these strategies include: "The recovery of areas under bridges of the great road infrastructures of the city, the promotion of gardens on the roofs of the city center, also known as 'green roofs', and the project to add greenery to the Viaducto Miguel Alemán—the access road to the airport—are some of the projects of the Federal District Public Space Authority."[34]

In searching the internet for other examples of urban regeneration projects taking place in the central city of Mexico City, I found surprisingly many, ranging from large-scale projects to more ad hoc neighborhood-initiated endeavors. This ranges from roads being closed on Sundays to encourage more people to ride bikes to creating a larger bicycle culture to combat pollution[35] and the creation of vibrant pedestrian zones.[36]

So where does this leave Mexico City? Where does it leave us? Maybe it is problematic to attempt to weave together various threads from a city's history and culture of urban planning to government involvement, and then on top of that throw in thoughts and questions about the role of local churches in this whole mess of a process. And yet this is

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34 *Megacities,* 15.

35 Booth, "Car-saturated Mexico City lets bicycle riders rule the roads on Sunday mornings," para. 2.

36 Kazis, "How Mexico City Fought and Cajoled to Reclaim Streets for Pedestrians."

precisely where we need to jump into the dialogue and become engaged. If we hold to the transformative nature of the Gospel as being good news to urban dwellers we cannot divorce it from the realities of everyday life. For the 73 percent of the population of Mexico City who are slum dwellers what then is the appeal of the Gospel? Is it simply the good news that life *postmortem* will be good? Or are there social ramifications of the Gospel that not only empower and inspire life in the *here* and the *now* but which also will lead to human flourishing across the city? In order for us to answer this question in the affirmative then we *must* address the topic of the built environment of the city.

Chapter 5

The Site and Situation of a Just City Part 2

How do we address these systemic issues plaguing Mexico City's built environment from a Gospel-centered framework? The way we respond will reveal much about our theological convictions on the nature of the Gospel. Is it merely good news about life after death and reconciliation with God the Father through his son Jesus Christ? Yes, but there's more. The Gospel *is* the proclamation or announcement that the finished work of Christ on the cross has paid the penalty for our sins and satisfied the wrath of God. Yes, but there is *still* more. Timothy Keller writes, "The gospel is the good news that God has accomplished our salvation for us through Christ in order to bring us into a right relationship with him and eventually to destroy all the *results of sin* in the world."[1] The results of sin in the world? Keller goes on to explore the full ramifications of the Gospel:

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[1] Keller, *Center Church*, loc. 579. Italics mine.

There are two basic ways to answer the question "What is the gospel?" One is to offer the biblical good news of how you can get right with God. This is to understand the question to mean, "What must *I* do to be saved?" The second is to offer the biblical good news of what God will fully accomplish in history through the salvation of Jesus. This is to understand the question as "What hope is there for the world?"

If we conceive the question in the first, more individualistic way, we explain how a sinful human being can be reconciled to a holy God and how his or her life can be changed as a result. It is a message about *individuals*. The answer can be outlined: Who God is, what sin is, who Christ is and what he did, and what faith is. These are basically propositions. If we conceive of the question in the second way, to ask all that God is going to accomplish in history, we explain where the world came from, what went wrong with it, and what must happen for it to be mended. This is a message about the *world*. The answer can be outlined: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. These are chapters in a plotline, a story.[2]

In our example of Mexico City, its history of development and urban planning, as well as what is currently plaguing it, is ultimately a Gospel conversation. Question: What went wrong? Why are there so many who live in the slums without basic necessities? Answer: Because of the devastating impact of sin, both individual and systemic. As Keller explains, "All human problems are ultimately symptoms, and our separation from God is the cause."[3] All

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[2] Ibid., loc. 613.

[3] Ibid., loc. 518.

of this is rooted in the reality that we live in a fallen world (that is still marked by common grace) where the Gospel needs to take root not only in our lives, but also flow into the fabric of our cities. If sin wreaks havoc in the lives of *individuals* as well as city dwellers *collectively,* then what is the scope of the Gospel? As a result, when I write about a Gospel-centered response to this case study it is an attempt to answer Keller's two-prong question … "What must *I* do to be saved? What hope is there for the world?" Answering the latter question has physical, social, and economic realities all tied into it. But how can the Gospel impact the 73 percent of the residents of Mexico City who are slum dwellers? Not only that, but how can it impact urban planning policy and the built environment of this city?

Issues Influencing Urban Planning in Mexico City: Informal Human Settlements

There appears to be a polarity in the planning culture in Mexico City. On the one hand planners seem keen on urban regeneration projects that makes the city more appealing and desirable for international investment. But at the same time it appears that, whether intentional or unintentional, the swelling populations of slum dwellers on the urban periphery have been neglected.[4] How do we affirm the need for reinvestment and economic revitalization but at the same

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[4] With that said there are and have been numerous creative projects that certainly do benefit the poor. For example, Mayor Ebrard took the lead in building an ice rink, bus rapid transit, and in creating more and more car-free streets.

time point out the disparities of funneling dollars away from those who are in desperate need? Aguilar and Santos assert that, "local governments should stop regarding IHSs[5] as a symptom of over-urbanization and stop utilizing land-use policies as a means of curbing urban growth. Instead, these governments need to: work constructively with slum dwellers, design and apply measures for informal land and housing markets, and develop physical and financial strategies for future growth."[6] This highlights the disparity between central city planning versus informal planning in the squatter settlements.

The planning culture in Mexico City has been derided as reactive. As Aguilar and Santos explain, "It is argued that Mexico City's land-use policy has been reactive and internally inconsistent, failing to take informal settlements into account, has not offered the poor access to housing with adequate services and greater security in terms of land tenure, and lacks the necessary financial resources and institutional capabilities for providing solutions to these problems."[7] This surfaces in regards to informal human settlements. "Despite this growing number of inhabitants with illegal and precarious living conditions, land-use policies have been unable to find solutions for these settlements, and that has a direct repercussion on Latin American cities' lack of social justice and environmental

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[5] Informal Human Settlements.

[6] Aguilar and Santos. "Informal settlements' needs and environmental conservation in Mexico City," 649.

[7] Ibid.

sustainability."[8] This inability to deal with these informal settlements and create access to land or affordable housing has led to a high degree of tolerance of these living conditions by the city governments.[9] This stands in stark contrast to urban regeneration projects that have cost hundreds of millions of dollars. It is to be noted that projects like these tend to cater to the white-collar middle class and tourists whereas the urban poor are left without resources and infrastructure. What about these informal human settlements?

Urban design is more than a collection of buildings, the space between them, transit systems, and green infrastructure. It reflects a value system. Montgomery notes that "Urban spaces and systems do not merely reflect altruistic attempts to solve the complex problem of people living close together, and they are more than an embodiment of the creative tension between competing ideas. They are shaped by struggles between competing groups of people. They apportion the benefits of urban life. They express who has power and who does not. In so doing, they shape the mind and the soul of the city."[10] There are competing views of the city and who lays claim to the right to influence or dictate design and infrastructure. We see this played out in these informal human settlements. It is not that those who live there chose this way of life and the resultant built environment because of some value system that they adhered

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., 650.

[10] Montgomery, *Happy City*, loc. 3431.

to, but more or less because they were thrust into these desperate environments because of the competing value systems of those with money and power.

Policy Recommendations

In light of Mexico City's past and current urban planning culture, coupled with the urban realities of both a powerful economy and millions of slum dwellers, there are several policy recommendations that I will explore to help the city not only retain its status as a global city, but also to address the inequities on the urban periphery. Keep in mind that this is merely an illustration or example of different responses to what is plaguing the city. In other words, my goal is to move the conversation forward about creative ways that the church *can* be involved. As a result, my background and framework is that of a pastor or missionary, *not* as an urban planner, developer, or local politician. Nevertheless, I feel it is necessary to at least give some specific concrete examples. The focus of this policy-making framework is to encourage the planning process to be more collaborative in nature as well as to advocate for a synthesis of informal (organic) and formal planning in these squatter settlements. We cannot divorce this conversation from the Gospel. What bearing does the Gospel have on rectifying these desperate situations that plague not only Mexico City, but many other cities around the world? What role can the church play in this and how much impact can it have?

Collaborative Planning / Negotiation

The first recommendation I would make is for urban planners, whether on the municipal, state, or federal level, to continue to move away from technocratic forms of planning. In doing so, they need to learn from planners and planning policies in other countries like Canada and the United States and take a more collaborative approach by getting the citizenry involved. There already has been progress in this direction through various projects and initiatives. What these current renewal projects in the city reveal is the changing nature of how planning is done. Castillo notes the differences between urban regeneration projects in the past compared with those after 2000. "It is also different because the City Government facilitates the participation of the private sector in private spaces for the reconstruction or renewal of affected buildings or in the construction of new edifications for all kinds of activities which promote the regeneration of the central areas creating synergies which contribute to the economic and social advance of the community."[11]

A good model for a collaborative approach that involves the public can be found in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Friedmann states that Vancouver "is the highest quality urban realm in North America."[12] Why this is relevant for Mexico City is precisely because of the processes

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[11] Castillo, "Urban Renewal of the N-W Area of the Historic Center and the Alameda Corridor of Mexico City," 1-2.

[12] Friedmann, *Insurgencies,* 192.

and policies that moved Vancouver in this direction, distinctively by involving local residents. "How this transformation of Vancouver's central district came about reveals a planning culture that is based on a consensual process initiated and led by the local state that involved, in addition to the City Council itself, city planners, architects, developers, and the general public."[13] Mexico City, already a global economic powerhouse, can involve its citizens and the private sector in these redevelopment projects whether in the urban core or on the periphery.

Where this becomes challenging and at the same time hopeful is to apply this framework in the informal human settlements. Vancouver is a good case study in that it reveals that public involvement was an enormous asset in the planning process. Churches in the city, whether in established neighborhoods or new ones in these informal human settlements, can empower and mobilize people and serve as a bridge with the city. They can help organize a collective voice of the populace to have their rights heard.

Informal human settlements, by and large, developed precisely because of the lack of government control and planning. As a result, these ad hoc communities developed more organically with little to no outside help or resources. What I have already noted earlier is that many of the services that an urban infrastructure provides do not reach out to these areas. This includes basic water and sewer, safe access to electricity, and public transportation. These are realities that plague Mexico City and many other cities in

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13 Ibid., 193.

developing countries. However, public involvement and collaboration could be the catalyst to find innovative ways to provide basic services and access to those who live in those communities. This is where the church can step in, to advocate, organize, and help push towards a helpful solution. This leads to the next policy recommendation. It continues in this vein to encourage the entrepreneurial prowess that is housed within the city's citizenry, especially in these informal settlements.

Start with Culture (People) First

In essence, the conversation about collaboration between a city's government and its inhabitants becomes a conversation about place-making. How do developers and government leaders in Mexico City make the city both livable and functional for its citizens, especially those who are already underserved on the urban periphery? As an illustration, I will highlight some of the tensions between New Urbanist principles compared to a more "organic" urbanism. B.D. Wortham-Galvin writes about the concept of place-making in her chapter "Making the Familiar Strange: Understanding Design Practice as Cultural Practice" in the book *The Urban Wisdom of Jane Jacobs.* The tension at hand revolves around New Urbanist concepts which lean more heavily on the structural, design, or architectural framework in comparison to Jacobs's approach. While both would make the claim that they are advocating for a vibrant and healthy urbanism, it is the *how* or the *starting point* that is the most challenging issue. "The New

Urbanists employ a tautological approach—that architecture should be based on architecture. In contrast, Jacobs's seminal tract, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, makes the argument that architecture should start with culture in order to make place in the city."[14] The Congress for the New Urbanism addresses place-making from the starting point of design or architecture. Conversely, what Wortham-Galvin makes clear is that Jacobs started with culture:

> It is hard for New Urbanism to foster Jacobs's beloved notions of diversity and vitality of uses, people, economies and ecologies when implementing the unifying vision of a comprehensive plan, instead of infilling tactically in an extant culture. When culture is, therefore, rendered homogenous and applied from the top down, organic transformation and the potential for democratic action are slighted and made invisible, if not impossible.[15]

Where this dialogue becomes helpful in terms of policy recommendation for planners in Mexico City is to ask, "What is your starting point?" As we've seen, there can be two starting points: the *physical* (design, structural, architecture) or the *cultural* (people). A collaborative approach to planning starts first and foremost with the cultural. It is in the process of working with the people that best-practices in design and planning can be implemented that meet the needs of the people rather than a technocratic

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[14] Wortham-Galvin, "Making the Familiar Strange: Understanding Design Practice as Cultural Practice," 238.

[15] Ibid., 239.

approach that does not include input and feedback from the citizenry. Therefore, my policy recommendation would be for planners to start with the cultural perspective rather than simply the physical or the design perspective.

Already the implications for church involvement are staggering. As you read through these recommendations my hope is that you will do so with the framework in mind of how the church *can* be involved. When it comes to finding a better solution to make a city more livable, there are not too many organizations or institutions (both formal and informal) that have the pulse of the city like churches do. They are rooted in neighborhoods which means they are on the front lines of seeing the impact of both good and bad urban design and how it impacts congregants. They know what ails a neighborhood as well as what brings it hope and joy. To recommend that we ought to start with culture or people first is an invitation for the church to unify the collective voice of the neighborhood or community.

Encourage Neo-Organic Urbanism

My final policy recommendation continues in the same collaborative vein. What I am proposing is to continue to encourage "organic" (informal) urbanism that defines life and the built environment in these informal human settlements, but with a the new twist which I am calling *Neo-Organic Urbanism.* This is unique in that it is a collaborative development process in these informal human settlements that works closely with government leaders and planners. In other words, most often these squatter settlements are

defined as an ad hoc development, as people simply scrape together materials for housing or create and sell goods in an informal economy. Rather than simply doing away with all of that, instead this is carried on in partnership with the city. The following are three different approaches or frameworks in which to affirm and encourage this collaborative neo-organic urbanism.

Rebecca Sanborn Stone in her chapter "Guerrilla Urbanism" in *Cities 2.0* writes about the concept of "tactical urbanism [which] uses short-term actions to catalyze real, long-term change. It might be quirky, but it's a serious strategy for creating more vibrant, livable places through lightweight, temporary, grassroots projects called interventions."[16] These are ways that people across the planet are reclaiming spaces in cities and repurposing them. In some cases these are only temporary, but in others what starts off as temporary turns into permanent. These are cheap, creative, and flexible ways to improve urban life for city dwellers from pop-up or pocket parks to movies in a vacant lot. The end goal is not simply staging a show, but to organically create change in the urban fabric of the city. "Tactical urbanism offers a way to revitalize neighborhoods and build those more livable urban environments right now and with minimal red tape."[17] These can be creative ways to experiment with ideas of place-making that do not cost a lot of money for the city to implement. What is does is provide a creative way to address systemic issues in these squatter

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[16] Stone, "Guerrilla Urbanism," loc. 788.

[17] Ibid., loc. 799.

settlements that, if successful, could be expanded and invested in other ways.

Benjamin de la Peña writes about "the autocatalytic city." In this framework, he is advocating for more of a "messy urbanism" which stands in stark contrast to the framework of technocratic planning. Part of Peña's approach is in how he views the city. "Urban centers are evolving organisms, not engineering problems."[18] In this he pushes for a bottom-up rather than top-down urbanism that "actually works for the people in them."[19] Peña adds:

> Our understanding of cities has been shaped by our Industrial Age expectations of institutional control. As urban centers boom around the globe, however, we are hitting the limits of the machine model of cities. Metropolises are growing too fast for our industrial models to work. Our task, as so ably argued by author and urban activist Jane Jacobs, is not to command the city but to understand the processes that make it work.[20]

This affirms the need to encourage informal human settlements, but in a healthy approach that ensures it is done in collaboration with local governments. In other words, this policy recommendation would include the proposal not to fight these informal human settlements, but rather to do them *better*.

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[18] de la Peña, "The Autocatalytic City," loc. 965.

[19] Ibid., loc. 976.

[20] Ibid., Loc. 1045.

Charles Wolfe in his book *Urbanism Without Effort* is in sync with Stone and Peña. Wolfe even pulls together the polar extremes of organic urbanism versus the technocratic approach: "As the discussions continue today, the question of authentic versus prescribed urbanism should remain at the center of the urban stakeholder dialogue."[21] Wolfe's position is unique among the extreme polarities in that he advocates for the need to look beneath the surface of current urban realities to see what lies underneath. "While we might champion the programmed success of certain iconic examples, we risk ignoring the backstory of urban forms and functions, and failing to truly understand the traditional relationships between people and place."[22] It is through this that we can see historically how cities grew up more organically. He points to numerous cities and places that many of us love, enjoy, and adore, and some of the reasons behind their success and appeal was precisely because they grew organically … *without effort*. When we look at these informal settlements we need to account for the underlying conditions that created their presence. The goal is to tap into the creative ethos that formed their creation so as to inform the collaborative approach with city leaders. In this way we recognize the human potential housed with these settlements and view people as assets.

These three frameworks (guerrilla urbanism, the autocatalytic city, urbanism without effort) each affirm the positive elements of the informal settlements. Rather than

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[21] Wolfe, *Urbanism Without Effort*, loc. 97.

[22] Ibid., loc. 117.

viewing these areas as problems, we instead need to see them as hotbeds for innovation. And where they are lacking in terms of access to basic city services and the urban infrastructure is the point at which the city can step in and through collaboration ensure that all residents have ample opportunities for flourishing and access to city services.

Conclusion

These responses to some of the issues that plague Mexico City—*Collaborative Planning / Negotiation, Start with Culture (People) First,* and *Encourage Neo-Organic Urbanism*—all focus their attention on the informal settlements, the slums, on the urban periphery. This is strategic because of the reality of millions of city inhabitants living in these conditions. As seen above, millions of dollars have already been poured into urban regeneration projects in the central city which was necessary and welcomed. Conversely, it was the sheer size of these squatter settlements in terms of space and population, which prompted my recommendations to be focused on the creative and collaborative aspects rather than simply pouring money into the bottomless pit called infrastructure. In my opinion, the answers to the problems are located within the people themselves. It did not take a lot of money to create these informal settlements, and it is my opinion that through the creative genius of the people it does not have to take an endless supply of money to rectify the most problematic conditions.

It is precisely at this intersection that the church can intervene and get involved in the process. From advocacy to redevelopment the church can play an active role, especially in contexts like these informal human settlements that seem to be out of the reach of planning policies, zoning, codes, and even simple basic services. In addition to its previously mentioned advocacy role, I also believe that the church (both collectively as a group and individually) can play a role in development and redevelopment projects in slum communities. We will look later at numerous examples of the church not only throughout history but also today doing this very thing.

Chapter 6

Foundations for a Just City

Is Mexico City a just city and worthy of being made a blueprint or a template for other cities? While we may answer with a collective "no" there are still certainly aspects and facets of it that are truly just and blueprint worthy. This is true of every city. We can even find signs of hope and common grace in the informal human settlements where people do not have to fret over city ordinances or codes but who can at least put together their very own home. In more developed cities that simply is not an option; either people slip into homelessness or end up in heavily subsidized government-funded housing. Which is better?

For a few years I led building projects to the *colonias* of Tijuana, Mexico. Merriam-Webster defines a *colonia* as "an unincorporated settlement (as of Mexican-Americans or Mexicans) in the U.S. usually near the Mexican border that typically has poor services and squalid conditions."[1] Wikipedia adds: "Colonias lack all of the essential physical infrastructures and public services: clean water, sanitary

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[1] Merriam-Webster, Inc., "Colonia."

sewage, and adequate roads. Most *colonia* housing does not meet construction standards and building codes. Houses are often built little by little and often start as shabby tents of wood and cardboard."[2] It was into this world that over Easter spring break we would take twenty to thirty high school students down to build houses for different families. It was an impactful for time for both me and the students, but even more so for the families who received from us a new built-from-scratch home.

The homes were nothing special. Four walls, a couple windows, a doorway, and a slanted roof. In the United States many would consider this more or less a tool shed or a place to keep chickens or a riding lawnmower. But in the *colonia*s it was a family's new house. All day long we'd build houses. Sometimes it was on a steep hillside where the soon-to-be owners dug out a platform upon which the house would sit. Other times it was in a relatively flat spot filled with thousands of other makeshift homes with dangerous live wires crisscrossing above the homes as people hacked into power lines.

Each morning we'd weave our way up and down deeply rutted roads past other homes and opportunistic businesses amidst a thriving informal economy. Loaded down with a truck and trailer full of our supplies with another van or two behind with the students, we would soak in the sights and sounds as we observed lifestyles and living arrangements that were foreign to us all. In the evenings we would debrief and talk about the experience of the day. Most students would

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[2] Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., "Colonia."

comment how grateful they were about their life situations at home and vowed not to take it for granted. But is this really such an unjust city as we make it out to be? In some odd way these *colonias* are here because *they work* ... they are stepping stones towards the hope of a better life whether in the city or by finding a way to cross the border into the United States. People would not be flocking from all over Mexico if there wasn't hope and they didn't work.

On the other hand we cannot blindly fall into the trap of thinking that North America's more affluent cities, particularly their leafy suburbs, are the embodiment of a just city. Numerous studies point out that the more auto-dependent cities are, the more overweight the population is. In other words, bad urban design leading to obesity is certainly not just despite how affluent people are, the enormity of their homes, the kinds of high-tech gadgets they have, or how many and what kinds of cars they drive. You see, even Americans don't even want that anymore. Add to that the reality that nearly 40,000 people are killed in traffic accidents per year and now all of a sudden we begin to question the justness of a leafy suburban existence.

In the same way that we learn to acknowledge our own culture, its positives as well as its blind spots, when we approach Scripture, we need to learn what the concept of a just city really involves. As we transition to diving into some of the earliest references to cities in Scripture many of us will need to step outside of our comfortable North American lifestyles. A city's justness or lack thereof is not tied to the many things we take for granted today such as wifi access, ample parking, fast freeways, and the number of coffee shops

per square mile. We need to tackle this conversation in a contextualized manner or we will miss out on the nuggets from antiquity as together we explore the blueprints of the ancient cities of the Middle East.

Designs for a Just City

So how do we uncover the blueprints or designs for a just city as found in Scripture? I recently threw this question out on social media. Unfortunately most of the responses revolved around the presence of the just leaders found in Scripture and their character rather than addressing urban form. In other words, biblically speaking, we are walking into uncharted waters. It is not that the respondents were off-base or ill-informed, but rather this is a topic that most of us have not spent much time thinking about at all.

This past week I was in Chicago leading a session for a group of international missionaries. The focus of my teaching was on contextualization, urban form, and missiology. The premise of my presentation was that one of the most shaping influences in the lives of city dwellers is the built environment (human-made space). We need to analyze how (and why) the built environment (including transportation) not only influences those who live in the city, but also how this impacts the way we do ministry in the global urban context. Admittedly although most had experienced these influences, they had not really connected them to their ministry. It wasn't until about half way through that the conversation and interaction began picking up. Some even confessed their dislike of the city even though they were

ministering in some of the largest megacities on the planet today.

This is all part of the ministry dichotomy we have created. We assume a posture towards cities of simply being about the "spiritual" stuff like evangelism, church planting, and discipleship, while that "other stuff" is ... well, the "social Gospel." In a post entitled "My Conversion to Holistic Missions" TEAM missionary Dave Davis writes, "Church planting is the spiritual stuff of missions, and development work is the secular stuff, right? I've been converted to a lifestyle that does both."[3] In this article he writes about his "conversion" by detailing what it was like to build a road in south Asia and the implications that flowed from it. This then gets into the idea of *proclamaction* ... coupling together Gospel *proclamation* with Gospel *action*.[4] We cannot divorce the spiritual from the physical ... spiritual realities are played out in the physical realm and the physical impacts the spiritual. A just city then is just in terms of its social or moral fabric and this in turn is played out in the physical realm ... in this case the urban form.

But can we find this in Scripture?

Ray Bakke in *A Theology as Big as the City* asks, "Does God care only about people, or does he also care about places, including our cities? And if the Holy Spirit is in us, should we also care for both urban people and urban

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[3] Davis, "My Conversion to Holistic Missions," para. 5.

[4] Thanks to TEAM Senior Director Steven Dresselhaus for throwing this nugget my way.

places?"[5]   He writes about the evangelicalism of his childhood which "lacked a conscious theology of place"[6] in that it did not take seriously place, geography, or the built environment. This is the result of the dichotomy of our thinking. Bakke goes on to say, "It is a theological bias towards Greek individualism and away from a biblical holistic theology, which for me includes not only the physical aspects of persons but also geography in which we have identity and security."[7]

It is this notion of holistic thinking that I plan to use as the backdrop of our exploration of Scripture. If Bakke is correct in his assertion that "God's kingdom agenda seeks the personal salvation of all persons and the social transformations of all places"[8] then we need to seriously consider urban form. The rest of this chapter will focus on two brief examples of justness as demonstrated in different aspects of urban form. I am cognizant that the biblical writers did not have these nuances in mind when they wrote what they did under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. However, we certainly can see traces of ways that the built environment revealed the nature and character of a just God.

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[5] Bakke, *A Theology as Big as the City*, 61.

[6] Ibid., 60.

[7] Ibid., 61.

[8] Ibid., 66.

Storehouses for the Needy

In Malachi 3:10 we find God rebuking the people of Israel for their wayward ways. Among many grievances he had against his people he said, "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my place." Unfortunately many pastors today use that passage in subtle (or not so subtle) ways to chide their congregations into giving more to the church or to a capital fundraising campaign.

But the fact is these buildings or storehouses were part of ancient Israel's tithing system. The tithe was significantly more than today's monetary offering for the furtherance of religious services through a local church. "When the Israelites offered their tithes, they confessed God's providence to their forefathers, His deliverance in their time of need, His redemption of them from oppression, and His gift of the land of Canaan (Deut. 26:5-9)."[9] However, there were two other components to the tithe that made their worship more holistic than how we view it today; there was an equity component and an economic dimension. J. Daniel Hays writes, "Part of the covenantal relationship that Israel had with Yahweh was the command that they care for the underclass, those people who did not have enough political and economic clout in the society to fend for themselves."[10] Packer *et al* flesh this out further: "They invited the Levites, the poor, the widows, and the orphans of their local

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[9] Packer, et al., *Nelson's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Bible Facts*, 330.

[10] Hays, *The Message of the Prophets*, 70.

community to join them at the central sanctuary as they made these offerings to the Lord."[11]

There was certainly an economic dimension to their tithe, since it involved offering to the Lord a large part of their time, the first fruits of their grain and livestock, and the freewill offerings of their lives and property.[12] Tithes supported the building of the tabernacle and the temple, caring for the needs of the Levites and priests, but also to care for the least and the last. In other words, what we consider a tithe was for the people of Israel probably three tithes.

> They called the first "the Lord's tithe." It was the one-tenth of their money and produce, and they gave it to the Levites, who weren't allowed to own any land (Num. 18:21-24). From what they received, the Levites gave a tithe to the priests (Num. 18:26).
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> The Israelites gave a second tithe three times a year when they went to the central sanctuary (Deut. 12:6-7, 17-18). They gave the third tithe once every three years; they left it at the city gate to be distributed among the Levites, strangers, orphans, and widows (Deut. 14:27-29). These tithes amounted to about 13 percent of a man's total income. The tithe system allowed all of the Israelites to offer their possessions to God. It spread the responsibility for maintaining worship among the rich and poor, the willing and the unwilling.[13]

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[11] *Nelson's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Bible Facts*, 330.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid., 386.

This gives us the backdrop to what we read earlier in Malachi. What he found is that the people had stopped tithing and as a result the poor, the foreigner, the widow … the marginalized … suffered greatly. This economic dimension of the tithe was supposed to take care of those most vulnerable. Instead selfishness persisted and the storehouses became broken and empty despite being essential to preserving food. "There were a number of ways of keeping pests away. The storehouses were built of brick with thick walls, and the only way in was through a hole on the top of the building. The inside of the walls were plastered. Such storehouses were used to provide a central place to receive the offerings that supported the ministry."[14]

These buildings were used to store and dispense food to the needy to maintain the equitable spiritual, social, and economic system that God established. In other words, these storehouses, although not used exclusively for the tithe as farmers had their own storehouses, were symbols of this reality of living under God's loving care. It was when the people stopped tithing and caring for the people that God stepped in to proclaim that not only were they robbing the needy, but in fact they were robbing God. "But you say, 'How have we robbed you?' In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you."[15]

These storehouses then could be considered "structures of equity." They were used to dispense not only food, but

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[14] Gower, *The Manners and Customs of Bible Times*, 102-103.

[15] Malachi 3:8-9.

God's love and care for the marginalized. Even though this is a small example of a seemingly common structure, the presence of these storehouses and their conditions revealed much about the conditions of the heart of the Israelites not only towards God, but towards those he directed them to care for according to his Law. If we are to begin applying this to the notions of a just city we can observe that different structures can help or harm the health of a city. Oppressive architecture sours the mood and demeanor of a neighborhood. A life-giving community center can be just what a struggling neighborhood needs, a new grocery store in a community that had bottomed out gives residents the ability to now buy fresh food, and the restoration of beautiful brownstones can all collectively enhance the nature of a neighborhood, help the residents, and buttress their collective neighborhood pride.

Rebuilders of the City

One more example will be used to illustrate some foundational thoughts on the built environment of a just city. This one comes from another Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, and gets immediately to the heart of the intersection between justice or justness and the built environment. While most of us do not have a framework for storehouses per se, one of the ideas that we do get and understand is this notion of the restoration of streets to dwell in. Urban renewal, urban revitalization, and gentrification are terms in the vocabulary of many today's city dwellers. They are all directly linked to "restoration" in some way, shape, or manner.

In Isaiah 58 God is calling his people, who have wandered from him and his just precepts, back to live righteously. Hays explains that "throughout the prophetic books the prophets repeatedly charge Israel/Judah with three basic indictments: idolatry, lack of social justice, and reliance on religious ritual rather than true relationship."[16] God is rebuking his people for their empty rituals and their oppression of the marginalized which includes neglecting the needs of the homeless and hungry (vv.1-7). This reveals a direct correlation between their love and worship of God and the justness of their cities, including care and concern for the least and the last. When the nation drifted from God one result was unjust cities and the mistreatment of those most vulnerable. But if they would repent and return to God, he promises that things will begin rapidly to change for the better and that includes the built environment of their cities.

> Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
> you shall cry, and he will say, "Here I am."
> If you take away the yoke from your midst,
> the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,
> if you pour yourself out for the hungry
> and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
> then shall your light rise in the darkness
> and your gloom be as the noonday.
> And the Lord will guide you continually
> and satisfy your desire in scorched places
> and make your bones strong;
> and you shall be like a watered garden,
> like a spring of water,
> whose waters do not fail.

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16 *The Message of the Prophets*, 137.

> And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
> you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
> you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
> the restorer of streets to dwell in.[17]

Isaiah was living in Jerusalem while delivering his prophetic words to the people of Judah during a time of severe crisis.

> During the reign of Ahaz (735-715 BC), Judah is threatened by the Syro-Ephraimite (Syria and Israel) alliance and turns to Assyria for help. Assyria destroys the northern kingdom Israel in 722 BC, and in 701 BC the Assyrian king Sennacherib attacks Jerusalem. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah are cast in this geopolitical setting. The second half of Isaiah (40-66), however, appears to be directed to those in the exile (i.e., after 586 BC) and under Persian domination (i.e., after 539 BC).[18]

By the time we get to chapter 58 we encounter the thrust of Isaiah's prophecy about a future exile. Chapter 58 therefore is directed towards these exiles who hope to return to Jerusalem.

Because of Judah's idolatry, lack of social justice, and empty ritual God allowed them to be taken into captivity. This lack of justness had an impact on the built environment of Jerusalem. This is why in Isaiah 58:12 it is significant that we read, "And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be

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[17] Isaiah 58:9-12. Italics added.

[18] *The Message of the Prophets*, 96.

called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in." If God's people would turn their hardened hearts back towards him, love and worship him, and forgo their idolatrous ways then in turn he would lead them back to Jerusalem to repair the city. Not only that but the vibrant street life would return. Because of their unjust practices and idolatry the city and streets were in shambles, a direct result of their sin. Interestingly is the connection or correlation between the two.

Lance Freeman in his book *There Goes the Hood: Gentrification from the Ground Up* focuses his research on the gentrification process in two distinct predominantly black neighborhoods in New York City, Harlem and Clinton Hill. What makes this book unique in the discourse on gentrification is that it truly is from the "bottom up," in that it tackles the subject from the perspective of those who are living through neighborhood changes brought on by gentrification rather than from the "top down" perspective of academics (even though Freeman is one), policy makers, and so forth. Full of on-the-street interviews, the reader is given a sneak peek into the world of what it is like for blacks in once bottomed out neighborhoods to experience gentrification before their eyes. This echoes what Isaiah mentioned about the restoration of streets to dwell in.

The tension within gentrification is that whereas these once vibrant urban communities were the life and hub of the black community, they had been disinvested and allowed to decline. As a result basic amenities and services left the neighborhood or were cut off altogether. Many people were stuck in communities with little of the economic vibrancy

that had once made city life enjoyable. Streets had become dangerous and full of crime and drugs. For example, Myrtle Avenue in Harlem was dubbed "Murder Avenue." However, as gentrification brought in a new wave of mostly white gentry, blacks found that all of a sudden amenities and services began returning to their neighborhood. "Though appreciative of neighborhood improvements associated with gentrification, many see this as evidence that such amenities and services are only provided when whites move into their neighborhoods."[19]   Injustices created these ghettos and allowed them to rapidly decline. These injustices included housing and market exclusion. But why does it take an influx of ethnic middle-class whites to move in before street life is improved? How does this tie into the example from Isaiah where the practice of justice and a love for God resulted in a vibrant city and healthy streets?

In Isaiah we catch a glimpse of a city being rebuilt as well as a healthy and vibrant street life being restored. Not only is this a sign of a healthy neighborhood in the cities of today, but it was also reflective of the economic health and vitality of a just city in ancient cities as well. Connecting neighborhoods like Harlem and Clinton Hill and the neighborhood changes brought on by gentrification with cities like Jerusalem is problematic on the surface. However, underneath it all is a common storyline. In both cases unjustness created unsafe and unsavory streets, neighborhoods, and cities. For ancient Jerusalem it came as a result of the people walking away from God which allowed

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[19] Freeman, *There Goes the Hood*, loc. 40.

the oppression of the foreigner, widow, poor, and orphan to seep in. This had a significant impact on the city and its vibrant street life. The same goes for neighborhoods like Harlem and Clinton Hill. Systemic injustices including racism and market or economic exclusion allowed them to become bottomed out ghettos. Even though Harlem had its renaissance and golden era in the early twentieth century, racism and injustices allowed it to decline with services and amenities alike fleeing the neighborhood.

Alan Ehrenhalt notes that "Street life is perhaps the most crucial aspect of urban revival of the twenty-first century, and street life is not dependent on demographic equality, much as we might desire it to be."[20] There is a direct correlation between safe and enjoyable streets and this notion of justness. Sure, we need to keep in mind that even in today's cities what is deemed as vibrant, walkable urbanism is often found in middle-class neighborhoods, but it doesn't always have to be that way nor is it always the case. Again, this is where we can often be blinded by our own cultural filters. We inadvertently assume that a desirable street life is full of brew pubs, third wave coffee roasters, boutique stores, and the like. While that may appeal to the tastes of middle-class whites in the creative class, when viewed from a global perspective the notion of what makes street life desirable and vibrant can vary from place to place.

Now it is time to begin putting the pieces together from Isaiah and the brief example of two NYC neighborhoods. Injustices create unsafe and unsavory streets. In the case of

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[20] Ehrenhalt, *The Great Inversion and the Future of the American City*, loc. 1096.

ancient Jerusalem it came as the result of the people oppressing the marginalized and indulging in idolatry. In today's bottomed-out urban neighborhoods or slum communities it is still tied to the practice of oppression whether through market or economic exclusion, racism, unjust housing practices, and so forth. Those are the root causes. But what many inadvertently focus on (the criminal activity, the drug trade, the prostitution and so on) are often actually the "expressions" or symptoms of deeper injustices.

What is also a challenge for some is to connect urban renewal and gentrification, this notion of lifting that takes place in depressed neighborhoods, to be part of a renewed sense of justness returning. I disagree. Because this is where the modern city storyline breaks from ancient Jerusalem under God's theocratic care. We see then, as was explained earlier, that there was truly a direct correlation between their just practices and love for God and the health and vitality of their cities. The more wicked the people were the more the city (literally and figuratively) crumbled. However, while in today's modern cities new entertainment districts or new urbanist districts, may on the outside appear healthy, fancy, and chic, they can also mask or hide deeper injustices and oppression. This should give us pause to continue to be students of our cities and the built environment.

These two examples from antiquity serve as reminders of the connections between architecture and urban form with the presence (or lack thereof) of justice. It is much clearer to readers of today peering back thousands of years to see these connections than it can be for us today. While it is

easy to spot blatant injustices in a shantytown, it becomes more difficult to discern them in urban renewal areas or even expansive suburbs. In both cases we need to learn to train our eyes to see the connections.

Chapter 7

God's Urban Renewal Plan

It is a scene well-trodden, talked about, and often quoted in our household from a movie that we watch repeatedly ... *Nacho Libre*. Nacho (a monk and monastery cook played by Jack Black) is sitting in Sister Encarnación's quarters while they share crunchy toast. During the course of their conversation Nacho, while trying to defend his importance in the orphanage, comments, "They think I do not know a buttload of crap about the Gospel, but I do!" Ironically, this conversation is probably played internally in the minds of many Christian writers, thinkers, and leaders today. With the *Gospel*-prefix attached to seemingly everything and anything today in the church (e.g. *Gospel* communities, *Gospel-centered* preaching, etc.) many are left wondering what the Gospel truly is. Or is it simply another in a long line of adjectives applied in the church marketing world ... seeker, emerging, emergent, missional ... *Gospel?* Maybe we don't really know a buttload of crap about the Gospel.

What is the nature of the Gospel and what is its significance in our conversation about God's urban renewal

plan and the built environment of cities? Although there are ample works out there specifically addressing the nature and the parameters of the Gospel, for our sake here are the questions that I will attempt to address or at least poke and prod at in this chapter: What is the Gospel? What is the nature of the Gospel? What is the storyline of the Gospel ... of God's cosmic renewal plan? What is the relationship between the Gospel and the city? Is city-building Gospel ministry? Does Gospel renewal impact the city?

Maybe I can relate to Nacho in that I write as one of lowly status. While I'm not a monastery cook I would certainly not classify myself as a theologian or biblical scholar. In other words, as I wrestle with these questions related to the implications of the Gospel in relation to the built environment of the city some of my thoughts will be raw and unfinished, my sentences clunky, and maybe even borderline misused. I only note this based on a recent example when I was leading a workshop about the topic of bikeability, mobility, and urban churches. There is a session that I do each time on this topic of the Gospel where I weave the Gospel story into the conversation about cities and the church's role within the city. At one point in front of everyone an older pastor became belligerent and told me that I was a heretic. He said that I was twisting the Gospel and dipping into Liberation Theology. [1]   The irony is that

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[1] Actually I admit it. Phillip Berryman describes this theological stream in his work Liberation Theology as, "an interpretation of Christian faith through the poor's suffering, their struggle and hope, and a critique of society and the Catholic faith and Christianity through the eyes of the poor." I contend we are truly missing out when we fail to do theology "from below."

theologically I am conservative, boring, and rather vanilla. But when we wade into the waters of the Gospel there are numerous theological streams that feed into the conversation.

There are certain themes in my writings that continue to surface repeatedly. Usually that indicates these are topics with which I am struggling and wrestling. Like a luchador wrestling match there is a back-and-forth struggle for me to gain the upper hand on a topic. The theme of the Gospel or the urban mission of the church as an outflow of the Gospel continues to pique my curiosity while it pains me to get a precise grasp on what it means. It is easy to fall into a reactionary posture of going to the other extreme of what we had been taught in light of changing worldviews, transitioning church culture, and so forth. For many who have been educated, raised, and trained in conservative evangelical churches or institutions of higher learning, which may have purported to teach a reductionistic Gospel, but who then began to be carried swiftly downstream into Postmodernism, this meant jettisoning much of what they had learned. This could mean abandoning church traditions, liturgical forms, spiritual formation practices, and of course the theology that once was the foundation of our epistemology. In other words, a lot of theological babies got thrown out with the bath water.

On the flip side Postmodernism coupled together with an expanding globalization certainly has brought us into contact with theological streams that are *not* Northern and Western (or white). I have been greatly challenged, stimulated, and encouraged by reading works ranging from

Eastern Orthodox mysticism to Liberation Theology as I have been confronted with a more "global theology" that has challenged and continues to challenge my assumptions and premises that are part and parcel of middle-class white evangelicalism. This is certainly not *white guilt* or anything like that, but an admission that while much (and rightly so) of my theology is still rooted in historical orthodoxy, it is still influenced and nuanced by my *home culture*. In other words, while I've been leaning on church history and the development of theology from the first century onward, my own cultural upbringing and worldview have shaped and influenced how I view the Gospel. In some instances there are elements that are highlighted and shine brightly from my cultural vantage point. Conversely, there are aspects that I miss due to cultural blinders.

As I write this I am not making assertions of relativism, that we cannot know absolute truth, or *everything* is bound to culture. What I am asserting is that our own culture, whether we grew up in suburban North America, rural western China, urban Latin America, or eastern Europe influences our cultural framework which in turn influences our theology at least to some degree. With that established, now let's turn our attention to the Gospel itself.

What is the Gospel?

"Gospel," Brian Chapell writes, "simply means 'good news.' The Bible uses the term to refer to the message that God has fulfilled his promise to send a Savior to rescue broken people, restore creation's glory, and rule over all with

compassion and justice."[2] Already from this reveals that the Gospel is more than merely "populating heaven." I realize that is a crass and unfair way to describe what many of us have come to understand the Gospel, but it hopefully jolts us into thinking more deeply about the Gospel. If it is *more* than about life *postmortem* then what is the "more" and how far do we take it beyond its original intent, scope, or meaning?

Scot McKnight rightly asserts, "I think we've got the gospel wrong, or at least our current understanding is only a pale reflection of the gospel of Jesus and the apostles."[3] I would be the first to admit that this describes me and my journey in understanding what this Good News is all about. For years after coming to faith in Christ I simply had assumed it was about Jesus dying for not only my sins, but the sins of the world in order to pay the penalty for our rebellion that began in the Garden, that Jesus was sacrificially loving us back into a right relationship with the Father as we repent of our errant and wayward ways, and turning instead to the loving arms of our Heavenly Father. Now this is as true today as it was when I first heard the Gospel. However, what I did not understand and what I am slowly learning is that the scope of the Gospel is much wider, deeper, and more profound than I could ever have imagined.

Chapell adds, "God's rescue, restoration, and rule apply to our spiritual condition but are not limited to spiritual

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2 Chapell, "What is the Gospel?," loc. 1903.

3 McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel*, 24.

realities. Through Jesus Christ, our God delivers his people from the eternal consequences of human sin that have touched everything. Our salvation includes us, but it's also bigger than we are."[4] What I had understood about the Gospel that led me to repentance and surrender was certainly spiritual in nature. But being culturally the product of the Enlightenment and a Greco-Roman worldview, where the spiritual and the physical are separated and compartmentalized, I had missed out on the physical ramifications of the Gospel. In other words, I had a limited and small view of the Gospel. As Eric Swanson and Sam Williams explain, "The redemption of the cross goes far beyond simply bringing us to heaven. In light of this, the gospel we share should address not only the spiritual consequences of our sin and rebellion but also the social and economic consequences."[5]

This was the crux of the disagreement I had with the pastor mentioned above. It was when I asserted that the Gospel is more than a spiritual thing and impacts the physical that he began becoming uncomfortable with where I was going. To affirm his hesitance, once we step over into the physical dynamics or implications of the Gospel how far do we take it? How far is too far? How far is not enough? During the early part of the twentieth century there was a division of thought and theology between the fundamentalists and the mainline churches over this very aspect of the nature of the Gospel. The Gospel was divided

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[4] "What is the Gospel?," loc. 1921.

[5] Swanson and Williams, *To Transform a City*, 135.

into two functions or outcomes. The "Social Gospel" sought physical and social transformation while minimizing personal repentance and transformation. The "Verbal Gospel" became focused on personal repentance but was divorced from the social, cultural, physical, or relational implications of the Gospel.

Eric Jacobsen refers to these different camps as Private and Public Christians: "Private Christians focus the majority of their efforts on evangelism and personal holiness. They may take part in other kinds of activities, such as feeding the hungry, but the evaluative criterion for these kinds of efforts is almost always the potential for evangelism and converting the individual."[6] What is interesting is how he connects this view with how this group approaches the city. "In addition to this positive focus on evangelism and personal holiness, the strategy of private Christians with respect to the city has also been shaped throughout the twentieth century by a number of negative factors."[7] This is the orientation of many evangelicals. For me personally, this is precisely where I began my spiritual journey. It is not that it is wrong, but I now see it as an underdeveloped approach to the city. But as we will see, this other camp too falls short.

> The public (or mainline) Christians in this country have understood their calling as a mandate to meet the physical needs of the poor. Whereas the private Christians dealt with the issue of poverty by encouraging individuals to get saved and then to let the

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[6] Jacobsen, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom*, 50.

[7] Ibid.

Holy Spirit clean up their lives, public Christians have focused their efforts on the root causes of poverty and setting up institutions to provide for people in need.[8]

While there are a lot of positives to this one, it also falls short in that it too is underdeveloped. We certainly can live out the Gospel and see it go forward in redemptive and healing ways, but people still need to have the opportunity to respond to the Savior. That is why a healthy and robust approach to the city embraces *both* approaches and holds them in healthy tension.

What is the Nature of the Gospel?

Timothy Keller brings both of these seemingly disparate elements of the Gospel together when he writes, "There are two basic ways to answer the question 'What is the gospel?' One is to offer the biblical good news of how you can get right with God. This is to understand the question to mean, 'What must *I* do to be saved?' The second is to offer the biblical good news of what God will fully accomplish in history through the salvation of Jesus. This is to understand the question, 'What hope is there for the world?'"[9] In other words, the Gospel is transformative to *both* the spiritual realities *and* the physical as well. To put it another way, the Good News of Jesus' sacrificial death, burial, and resurrection seeks to undo what original sin wrought. Adam's sin not only

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[8] Ibid., 54.

[9] *Center Church*, 32.

severed our relationship with God and initiated our rebellion and wantonness, but it also wreaked havoc on creation. From the beginning our sin had both spiritual and physical ramifications. "The first sins resulted in a cursed land ... Sin brought about the destruction of land and whole cities (Gen. 19; Ezek. 16:49)."[10]

If our sin and rebellion was and is manifested in both spiritual and physical alienation and ill-health, why would Jesus, who is called the *Second Adam*, [11] only come to rectify just one aspect? That line of thinking only affirms not only the "Verbal Gospel" but the furtherance of our embedded dualism where we have separated the spiritual from the physical. Swanson and Williams confront this when they write, "The redemption of the cross goes far beyond simply bringing us to heaven. In light of this, the gospel we share should address not only the spiritual consequences of our sin and rebellion but also the social and economic consequences."[12]

This is what these two authors call a *Thick Gospel*. "This *thick* gospel brings transformation to the totality of life. Christianity is not a form of Gnosticism, which values the soul but ignores the body and the material world. Jesus came to redeem *all* that is broken and invites us to join him in this wonderful work."[13] This is the point where we can begin at least to conceive of how the Gospel can and should impact

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[10] Shook, *Making Housing Happen*, loc. 1583.

[11] 1 Cor. 15:45-49.

[12] *To Transform a City,* 135.

[13] Ibid.

the built environment of cities. Oftentimes, as I mentioned earlier, our sin and rebellion are (or can be) exemplified in urban form. Where it is unhealthy and detrimental, the built environment of our cities reveals systemic brokenness, selfishness, greed, and so much more. It is a direct result of humanity's sin, pride, and wantonness. That does not minimize the impact of the loving care of God's common grace which continues to create beautiful neighborhoods and cities, but sin nonetheless devastates and is more extreme in places of squalid conditions such as slums or squatter settlements ... or in places like Park Avenue in NYC that reveal excess and greed.

What is the Storyline of the Gospel … of God's Cosmic Renewal Plan?

In his book *everPresent: How the Gospel Relocates Us In the Present*, Jeremy Writebol notes:

What would it be like in our cities if the gospel was displayed and declared by sent exiles? How would a city change over the course of generations if we intentionally lived, multiplied, and raised children, grandchildren, even great-grandchildren for the King? How would a city change as industrious, laboring workers engaged the office, working for the King himself? What would a city look like as the Kingdom citizens inhabited the social environments of their city to know, serve, and love their neighbors? How would things be different?[14]

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[14] Writebol, *everPresent*, loc. 1455.

In other words ... what does it look like when the Gospel begins taking root in our cities?

"Creation is *not* just the disposable backdrop to the lives of human creatures who were really intended to live somewhere else, and some day will do so. We are not redeemed *out of* creation, but as *part of* the redeemed creation itself ..."[15] The Gospel is the announcement of God returning order to everything that was devastated by original sin. This Good News proclamation is not about simply escaping the bonds of earth, a get-out-of-jail-free card. Nor does it address only the spiritual, but it also impacts humanity, creation, our cities ... *and* the built environment of our cities. In the same way that sin has wreaked havoc on our planet as a whole, the Gospel announces that Jesus died not only to reconcile broken people to God, but also to restore a broken creation including cities. Keller notes, "Christ's salvation does not merely save our souls so we can escape the pain of the curse on the physical world. Rather, the final goal is the renewal and restoration of the material world, and the redemption of both our souls *and* our bodies."[16]

What is the Relationship Between the Gospel and the City?

In case I have not been succinct enough in answering this question, let me rephrase my answer. The Gospel is about restoration ... restoring us and all of creation to a right

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[15] *Center Church*, 56.

[16] Ibid., 35.

relationship with the Father. Original sin devastated our relationship with God, our relationship with one another, and our relationship with creation (and that includes cities). The Good News that Jesus is the propitiation our sins undoes all that original sin brought. I like how Writebol states it: "If every place is made by God, for God, then the broken places that do not reflect God's glory must be restored."[17] Yes, as followers of Christ we are ambassadors of reconciliation between God and a fallen world, but our role as heralds and *doers* of the Good News goes beyond the spiritual and a simply verbal proclamation ... it requires *action*.

I will admit this opens the door for more theological controversy and hair-splitting. Some groups argue that we *join* God in this renewal process (or in establishing the Kingdom). Others counter that God is working things out towards his end-purposes and that our role is to proclaim or announce what he is up to (i.e., the Kingdom is *at hand*). In other words, we do not play an active role in this redemption and renewal process. It's not my wish to get entangled in this theological debate, as my goal here is merely to tackle this conversation "on the ground." For me, at least in this present context, the question I'm asking is *how* does this conversation play out in our everyday lives ministering and living in the city? And so I turn instead to Charles Finney, an early 19th century writer and thinker, knowing full well that whatever anyone says will only pour gas onto the fires of this debate.

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[17] *everPresent*, Loc. 270.

In his book *Lectures on Revival* Finney presents a helpful way in which to look at the role of the Gospel in terms of the city and our role in the process:

> There is a long-held belief that the task of furthering Christianity is not governed by ordinary rules of cause and effect—that there is no connection between tools and the result, no tendency in the means to produce the effect. No doctrine endangers the church more than this, and nothing is more absurd. Suppose someone preaches that doctrine to farmers. He kindly explains to them that God is sovereign, and will give them a crop only when it pleases Him. Plowing and planting and laboring as if they expected to raise a crop is wrong. It takes the work out of the hands of God, interferes with His sovereignty, and works in their own strength. He informs them that there is no dependable connection between their tools, knowledge, and resources and the result. Now suppose the farmers believed such a doctrine. We would starve![18]

What Finney showcases is the "partnership" between us and God. My intention is not to try to parse what that means, but to simply point out that we have an active role to play in the Gospel renewal of the city. Just as the farmers in Finney's example, we cannot simply be passive observers; otherwise *nothing will happen.*

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[18] Finney, *Lectures on Revival*, 15.

Is City-Building Gospel Ministry?

Like many pastors, I have framed License and Ordination certificates which verify that a church, denomination, or governing body has deemed me credible and worthy for "Gospel ministry." What that has meant in most cases is that I have been approved to be a pastor at a church to lead, teach, preach, shepherd, marry, and bury. Every ordination process differs from group to group, although the outcome is similar in the sense of what it means to undertake Gospel ministry. My goal is not to dismiss or diminish neither the process nor the value of ordination (that is for others to write and reflect on), but rather to challenge our assumptions, as to the nature of "Gospel ministry." If the Gospel in fact has a scope that is truly cosmic in nature how then should that challenge our assumptions of what being a minister of the Gospel is all about?

Now I understand that the Bible sets down clear qualifications and roles for pastors, elders, deacons, and bishops. We find descriptors, qualifications, and examples throughout the New Testament. As someone who affirms a high view of Scripture I submit to these as foundational for leaders in local churches. In other words, I am not pressing against those qualifications: what I *am* pushing back against is what we have deemed to be "Gospel ministry." To put it another way, if everything we have journeyed through together in this chapter has any semblance of validity, then what we view as Gospel ministry *must* change. Although Keller is writing in general about urban Christians, I believe

what he has to say applies to church leaders in particular: "Traditional evangelical churches tend to emphasize personal piety and rarely help believers understand how to maintain and apply their Christian beliefs and practice in the worlds of the arts, business, scholarship and government."[19] I want to couple that with something else he wrote in close proximity to this sentence: "Academic training in urban ethnography, urban demographics, and urban planning can be a great help to a church's lay leaders and staff members."[20]

What this does is it begins to stir the waters of what we mean by Gospel ministry. Is it merely about personal piety and dealing with the spiritual realities while overlooking the transformative role of the Gospel upon the city as it intersects with economics, government, urban planning and design, development, culture, and so much more? If the Gospel truly impacts the city on such a broad scale then they need to be included in what we deem to be Gospel ministry

On a monthly basis I meet with my reading group where we usually tackle books related to some facet of the city. Last week we met to discuss affordable housing and the churches' role in the development or redevelopment of the city. The group includes a smattering of professionals ranging from church planters to realtors to engineers and so on. One of the questions that came up was what role do these pastors and church planters see themselves playing when it comes to ensuring ample affordable housing in the neighborhoods in which they are ministering. How much can or should a

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[19] *Center Church*, loc. 4913.

[20] Ibid., loc. 4883.

pastor do? While conceding that not every pastor has the specific skills to make this happen, we did conclude that as a collective it's *churches* that can make it happen. The pastor can teach, advocate, and help mobilize people in the church to see this become a reality. Did you catch that? Even in this one example the role of the pastor in "Gospel ministry" has just expanded to the point that they see part of their roles as leading their churches to live out Jeremiah 29:4-7. Again, the pastor does not and should not need not take upon themselves the additional tasks of preparing draft renderings for a new development project, becoming a general contractor, and so on. But they can lead and mobilize their congregations and advocate on behalf of the project.

Christopher Wright points out that "our care for creation is motivated not solely by the fact that it was created by God and we were commanded to look after it, but also by the fact that it has been redeemed by Christ, and we are to erect signposts towards its ultimate destiny of complete restoration in Christ."[21] This redemption through Christ is the Good News that we proclaim and live out. As a result, Gospel ministry must include more than the things usually associated with how we view the role of a pastor. Yet most seminaries still uphold the traditional roles of a pastor. My undergrad degree is in Pastoral Ministries which means I had my fill of classes in theology, biblical studies, Greek, pastoral counseling, missions, and so forth. The pastor-specific classes were more or less about leading, teaching, preaching, counseling, visitation, and so forth. For most of

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[21] *The Mission of God's People*, 61.

the people I know in seminary who are working on their MDiv degrees, the storyline is the same. They learn theology, Greek and Hebrew, the Bible. But once they graduate they are ill-equipped to do the kind of "Gospel ministry" (as I've defined it) the city needs. As a result, many have taken further classes, attended conferences, or gone back to school to focus on urban studies, urban planning, architecture, community development, and the like. My question is: Why can't this be part of Gospel ministry training in seminaries? Are we pragmatic Neo-Gnostics in our approach to ministry in terms of what our training teaches and focuses on?

Does Gospel Renewal Impact the City?

Chapell writes, "Our sin is not just an annoyance to God. The sin of humanity has resulted in inestimable suffering."[22] The Gospel speaks to this suffering. We know that suffering plays out psychologically, emotionally, socially, and physically. The Gospel has the power to speak to and alleviate suffering. Yes, we know that we still live in a fallen world surrounded by systemic injustices, radicalized regimes, corporate greed and corruption and so on that impact the lives of believers globally. I am not suggesting that once we are in Christ we no longer will suffer or go through trails and tribulations. What I *am* saying is that the Gospel has the *power* to confront and redeem these sins on the individual and corporate level, and we know that *will happen,* "The Bible's story is that the God who created the universe, only

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[22] "What is the Gospel?," loc. 1940.

to see it ravaged by evil and sin, has committed himself to the total redemption and restoration of the whole creation, has accomplished it in advance through the cross and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, and will bring it to glorious completion in the new creation when Christ returns."[23]

This notion of Gospel renewal (or Gospel ministry) has direct ramifications for the city. The short answer to the question posed above—Does Gospel renewal impact the city?—is, "Yes." Gospel renewal does certainly impact the city. This is where the scope or implications of Gospel renewal go beyond transforming individuals and families; it also has the power to transform communities, structures, and the like ... as played out in urban form. Wright poignantly asserts, "Paul's vision of the gospel is as wide as creation itself, and that is because his understanding of the cross includes the whole of creation in the reconciling work of Christ. Now our mission is founded on the gospel and needs to reflect the length, breadth, and depth of the gospel. If, then, the cross of Christ is good news for the whole creation, our mission must include being and bringing the good news to the whole creation."[24]

This then sets the stage for the next chapter. It takes this conversation a step farther by looking at the connection between the Gospel and the built environment of our cities. This continues to be a fun adventure and maybe it is here that we can assert with Nacho the monastery cook that we actually do know a bit about the Gospel.

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23 *The Mission of God's* People, 48.

24 Ibid., 60.

Chapter 8

The Gospel and the Built Environment

Admittedly I have been a fan of urban renewal and the idea of restoring and lifting declined, struggling, and low-income neighborhoods and central business districts. I also admit that just by saying this I'm inviting all kinds of pushback (and rightly so). To begin, who's neighborhood is it? Who has the right to determine what is "good" and what is "blighted" about a neighborhood? Who has the right to have the final say as to what the neighborhood should become? This is also where the conversation becomes highly nuanced and contextualized. Depending on which city and which specific neighborhood is under discussion, this notion of renewal will be either welcomed or rejected (and more than likely the latter). This is a genuine point of controversy … who gets the decide?

Robert Park writes of cities as "man's most consistent and on the whole, his most successful attempt to remake the world he lives in more after his heart's desire. But, if the city is the world which man created, it is the world in which he is henceforth condemned to live. Thus, indirectly, and without any clear sense of the nature of his task, in making the city

man has remade himself."[1] In other words, the city that we envision reflects the image or ideal of what humanity desires for it to look like. If we like the built environment of the city we can congratulate ourselves. Conversely, if what we see is appalling and unhealthy then we are also to blame as well. The problem though is who gets to decide what form the built environment takes on? Then there is the reality that cities are built over the long term. As Jacobsen points out, "A rich and varied built environment must be built over generations, because any one generation can make only a limited contribution to the environment."[2]

Commenting on the point above that Robert Park was making, David Harvey notes:

> If Park is correct, then the question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from the question of what kind of people we want to be, what kinds of social relations we seek, what relations to nature we cherish, what style of daily life we desire, what kinds of technologies we deem appropriate, what aesthetic values we hold. The right to the city is, therefore, far more than a right of individual access to the resources that the city embodies: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city more after our heart's desire. It is, moreover, a collective rather than an individual right since changing the city inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power over the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake ourselves and our cities is,

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[1] Park, *On Social Control and Collective Behavior*, 3.

[2] Jacobsen, *The Space Between*, loc. 1566.

I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.[3]

When we begin to discuss the intersection between the Gospel and the built environment we need to at least introduce to the conversation this notion of the right to the city. Again, who has the right? The elite? Developers and architects? Urban planners? What about the people living in neighborhoods that are in need of "renewal?" For me, after living now in *very* desirable cities that are breathtaking in urban form (Vancouver, BC) or that foster innovation and creativity (Portland), they stand in stark contrast to the "less desirable" cities that I have also called home.

For me my journey began while living in Tucson, which I have said on numerous occasions is not a sexy city. I am not referring to the beautiful surroundings such as the Santa Catalina Mountains or the Sonoran Desert and their incredible flora and fauna. Simply put, the built environment of Tucson is not postcard-worthy. Yet it is still a city that I love and value deeply. But the central city and its downtown have been in need of a "facelift," revitalization, and good old-fashioned urban renewal to bring not only more economic activity back into the city, but to bolster the region's economic outlook as well. Six years ago before we moved to Portland there was a lot of conversation about Tucson renewing its downtown, installing a streetcar, and learning lessons from Portland. It was an exciting time and the conversations were riveting.

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[3] Harvey, "The Right to the City," 1-2.

But now that we're living in Portland I want to say to cities like Tucson and others that are pushing for "urban revitalization" not to in any way emulate Portland ... Please stop thinking like that. Don't do it. Seriously ... it is not worth it. Now let me explain.

I am truly into "urban revitalization" in the sense of making neighborhoods healthier and improving living conditions for everyone. That includes its social, physical, economic, and even spiritual aspects. However, most urban revitalization projects, while starting off with grandiose and "good" intentions for all end up creating districts and neighborhoods of wealth and exclusivity. Certainly moving into the central city of Portland would be and is a dream come true for many. However, after three years my response to that scenario is simply "meh." The central city of Portland is white, affluent (i.e., middle-class), desirable, not very diverse, and becoming more and more exclusive. Is this what we mean by "urban renewal" and is this something we would hope to see in every central city across the country?

I have read countless stories of urban renewal projects, whether grassroots and small-scale or mega-developments, and they all end up the same ... with gentrification and the resultant displacement of low-income minorities. If that is urban renewal then "no thanks." I'll stick with a corner convenience store selling cigarettes, 40-ouncers, and Twinkies rather than a Whole Foods, Trader Joe's, or New Seasons. If that's the reality of urban renewal then what should local churches and church plants be doing in response? If they help stabilize a neighborhood they pave the way for gentrification. But if they let it implode then they'd

see people leave the neighborhood (if they can) for better neighborhoods where they can give their kids a better chance at life. The million-dollar question then becomes, "How do we improve the neighborhood without inviting or accelerating gentrification?"

So what are we left with? Inclusive housing and other such programs certainly help. But established churches and new church plants in these kinds of communities are certainly in for a tough sled. Lately I've been shifting my attention and thinking outside of the central city (at least in Portland's case) to neighborhoods and districts that are not sexy or cool and without many "Portlandy" things like bike facilities, trendy eateries, coffee shops, brew pubs, and the like. What lessons have we learned (and are learning) from urban renewal? Are we simply making cities more exclusive and livable for the elite?

This opening rant is the backdrop and the context for exploring further the Gospel and the built environment. I certainly do not want my intentions to be mistaken. I am *not* applauding exclusionary redevelopment projects under the banner of the Gospel. Instead, I want to explore what a city looks like (or could look like) that has been impacted and influenced by the Gospel. There will obviously be areas and cases of overlap, but I will do my best to resist baptizing new movements as being "Gospel-centered" whether formally like New Urbanism or informally like guerrilla or tactical urbanism. As I have iterated and reiterated thus far, I am thoroughly convinced that our approach to Gospel ministry in the city is about redeeming both urban people and urban places. "The glorious truth is that the Bible gives us a gospel

that addresses every dimension of the problem that sin created. God's mission is the final destruction of all that is evil from his whole creation. Our mission therefore has to be as comprehensive in scope as the gospel the whole Bible gives us."[4]   So how does the Gospel impact the built environment of the city?

The two main points that I will address in this chapter are: (1) *The Gospel Creates Equity in Urban Form* and (2) *The Gospel Promotes Human Flourishing*. I will then unpack this second point by exploring this notion of flourishing from the cultural, social, economic, and physical frameworks. That is to say that when the Gospel is allowed to promote human flourishing through the built environment of the city it impacts these dimensions *because of* healthy, helpful, inclusive, and equitable urban form. Many have written already of the reality that the Gospel does promote and create equity as well as human flourishing. Where I will deviate from the more mainstream conversation is to approach these topics from the framework of the built environment first and foremost.

The Gospel Creates Equity in Urban Form

If humanity's sin and rebellion play out in urban form (The Tower of Babel is a vivid biblical example), then could we at least assert that Gospel renewal does (or can) play out in urban form as well? As we survey the landscape of our cities today, from global megacities in developing countries

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[4] Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 41.

ringed by desperate slum communities to exclusive affluent neighborhoods that create canyon-like divisions between the haves and have-nots, we can find humanity's rebellion exemplified in urban form. Exclusionary districts, abject poverty, slums, neglected minority neighborhoods that are crumbling and burning, redlining, blockbusting, and so on all reflect this reality. Sure, it may be hidden under such labels as "mobile capital" or "market forces" but beneath it we find greed, consumerism, racism, materialism, pride, and more which is sin. We do not have to be too creative or thoughtful to see how our sin and rebellion have not only devastated the built environment of our cities but in the natural environment as well. So how does the Gospel create equity in urban form?

As noted in the last chapter, "Gospel simply means 'good news.' The Bible uses the term to refer to the message that God has fulfilled his promise to send a Savior to rescue broken people, restore creation's glory, and rule over all with compassion and justice."[5] The dimensions of this definition are worth noting in that Jesus *is* the Good News sent to rescue broken people, restore creation's glory, and rule over all with compassion and justice. Since cities are part of creation then we can certainly conclude that they fall under God's cosmic restoration project. Some are dismissive of this assertion that cities are part of creation by bifurcating creation as *God-made* and cities as *manmade* and the *result* of the fall. However, the trajectory of cities was present long

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[5] Chapell, "What is the Gospel?," loc. 1903.

before the fall in Genesis 3 happened. Cities are part of the outflow of God's creation process.

The Gospel Promotes Human Flourishing

In their book *The City Reader*, editors Richard LeGates and Frederic Stout ask some very pointed questions. "As globalization continues to bring people from throughout the world into closer contact, and as the pace of immigration increases, the issue of exclusion becomes ever more pressing. In what different ways are some people excluded from participation in the life of the cities where they live? How is exclusion expressed in urban space?"[6] They point out that exclusion and access to the city (or the lack thereof) is reflected in urban spaces. It does not take a theological framework to notice that injustices, which we would call "sin," is expressed in urban form.

If the Gospel then promotes human flourishing in urban form then we can postulate that this in turn impacts the cultural, social, economic, and physical fabric of the city. It is a healthier city in terms of urban form. Most often the conversation starts at the other end of the spectrum. In addressing the health of cities many focus on *cultural* flourishing, strengthening such things as social capital and the local economy, and seeing the citizenry live happy and healthy lives physically (lower obesity rates, adequate exercise levels, etc.). Yet each of these areas are impacted greatly by

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[6] LeGates and Stout, *The City Reader*, 187.

urban form which is why I contend that we need to start there first.

Healthy Urban Form Impacts Cultural Flourishing

There is something magical about living in Portland. Earlier I mentioned that I was "over" living in the central city of Portland, but to a large degree that is not true. What frustrates me the most, as happens in every city, is the continued rise in housing prices (both renting and owning) and the exclusivity that generates. However, what makes Portland special is the strength of our bohemian and creative culture. Just this past week I had an enlightening conversation about Portland with a twenty-something from Toronto. She explained that for many in Toronto in her demographic look to Portland as a very desirable place to visit and live. We have a reputation for being liberal, creative, bohemian, free-flowing, and the like.

There are a myriad of explanations as to why this is the case. Some say this is part of the culture of the Pacific Northwest, while others turn to key land use decisions made in the history of the city, and others allude to a generalized West Coast mindset that is played out here. All of that is true along with many other factors, but what I want to point to is our built environment.

In a *Wall Street Journal* article titled "For Creative Cities, the Sky Has Its Limit," Richard Florida explains this whole phenomenon between creativity and urban form. If there is too much density then creativity (read: culture) is hampered. The solution is in mid-height buildings.

> Look at New York City. Its hubs of innovation aren't the great skyscraper districts that house established corporate and financial headquarters, media empires and wealthy people (an increasing number of whom are part-time residents who hail from the ranks of the global super-rich). The city's recent high-tech boom—500 start-ups in the last half decade, among them Kickstarter and Tumblr—is anchored in mid-rise, mixed-use neighborhoods like the Flatiron District, Midtown South, Chelsea and TriBeCa.[7]

This begins to explain the magic of Portland and our creative economy. Outside of the immediate central business district, most of the city's vibrant neighborhoods, corridors, and districts like the Pearl, Hawthorne, Belmont, or Alberta, are full of two- to four-story mixed-use buildings. Connecting them all is a robust network of neighborhood greenways for bicyclists. There is a direct correlation between Portland's built environment and our creative culture. The urban form allows for this cultural flourishing to take place. This was confirmed in the article "In Building Size and Age, Variety Yields Vibrancy" where Edward McMahon writes, "The creative economy thrives in older, mixed-use neighborhoods ... older, smaller buildings provide space for a strong local economy."[8]

Conversely, too much density and a city that is too vertical have more of an adverse effect than a healthy one.

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[7] Florida, "For Creative Cities, the Sky Has Its Limits," para. 10.

[8] McMahon, "In Building Size and Age, Variety Yields Vibrancy." para. 14-15.

In the hyper-crowded skyscraper districts of Shanghai, densities can approach 125,000 people per square mile. Giant buildings often function as vertical suburbs, muting the spontaneous encounters that provide cities with so much of their social, intellectual and commercial energy. People live their lives indoors in such places, wearing paths between their offices and the food courts, always seeing the same people.

In terms of innovation and creative impetus, Shanghai pales in comparison to New York, London, Paris and Milan, not to mention high-tech hubs like Silicon Valley, the Bay Area, Seattle, Boston, Austin and North Carolina's research triangle, all of which have much lower densities.

It turns out that what matters most for a city's metabolism—and, ultimately, for its economic growth—isn't density itself but how much people mix with each other.[9]

If we're going to have a conversation about the Gospel impacting urban form to create cultural flourishing then it would be prudent to at least identify what form the city would or could take. Next month I am traveling back to Montreal and Québec City to again walk the streets and talk about urban missiology with church planters and church leaders. To trek through Le Plateau-Mont-Royal in Montreal or Saint-Roch in Québec City is to encounter this expression of urban form that Richard Florida writes about. It's no wonder why these neighborhoods show up in articles and websites like *Bohemian Trails* which "is blog designed for

[9] Ibid., para. 4-6.

the savvy and stylish traveler. I have a love for off the beaten path destinations, as I tend to find beauty in untraditional people, places and things. *Bohemian Trails* aims to feature must-see places around the world, paying special attention to the underground art, music and fashion scenes that make each country unique."[10]

The Gospel leads to renewal on the cosmic as well as the local level. Instead of dealing with abstract concepts like "cosmic renewal" what would it look like when the Gospel goes forth in cities ... in *your* city and in *my* city? Would it or could it make urban form more healthy, creative, vibrant, and inclusive? If the answers to these questions is "yes" then this is why I am writing about what a healthy and vibrant cityscape even looks like. Otherwise we would be directionless as to what we even mean. It would be akin to talking about discipleship without the hard work of mentoring, praying, Bible reading, fasting, and other spiritual disciplines.

Healthy Urban Form Impacts Social Flourishing

Building on the last section where I explored how the built environment impacts the culture of a city, this section takes another step towards the tangible inclusion of social flourishing. It is one thing to talk about culture generically and another to talk about social ties in the city. In both cases urban form influences much whether we're talking about a neighborhood chock full of vertical skyscrapers or one of

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10 Bohemian Trails, "About," para. 1.

four-story edifices. Since the outcome of the Gospel at work in cities is not only about reconciliation and repentance, but also renewal, restoration, and healing then we can begin to see why a healthy built environment can advance or hamper this. That is to say, Gospel transformation should in some ways impact urban form which will lead to greater social flourishing.

Ali Madanipour writes about the scale of healthy urban form which accentuates social flourishing in cities:

> Historically, neighbourhoods have been the sites and physical manifestations of close social relationships and so have been praised by town planners, especially those who have looked nostalgically to the feudal bonds of medieval towns and the communal bonds of working-class neighbourhoods in the industrial city. A dichotomy emerged as a result of the unprecedented growth of the cities: between *gesellschaft* and *gemeinschaft*, between the alienation of the big city and the romanticized, small communities of towns and villages. To recreate the social cohesion of these small communities, it was thought , cities should be broken into smaller parts, into neighbourhoods.[11]

The scale of the city helps or hinders social flourishing. Richard Florida's insights cited in the last section speak to this. It also highlights the tension of how far we can or should take this conversation. While vertical high-density cities like Tokyo or Shanghai may lend themselves to incredible economic output, at the same time they could very well negatively impact the lives of those who live there. This

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[11] Madanipour, "Social Exclusion and Space," 192.

could be anything from the excessive pollution as found in Beijing or the higher rate of suicide as found in Tokyo. In both cases urban form does not lend itself to the kind of cultural or social flourishing that is healthy and helpful.

If the Gospel did come to bear on such cities as these what would it look like? Admittedly this is dangerous territory to get into because of its speculative nature. While I would contend that smaller-scale neighborhoods full of two- to four-story mixed-use neighborhoods would be the healthiest for cities, not only for physical health but social vibrancy as well, that does not mean then the only viable option would be to eradicate vertical cities or neighborhoods. On the contrary, the Gospel would lead to new expressions of community and social flourishing.

The foundation of this flourishing then is forgiveness and reconciliation with the Father through the Gospel. This in turn leads to social and racial reconciliation. The point that I am trying to emphasize here is that these are best played out and expressed in neighborhoods and districts with the "right kind" of urban form that lends itself to these kinds of relationships and social flourishing. LeGates and Stout write about this in their introduction to Jane Jacobs' chapter in *The City Reader* about what kind of urban form lends itself to social vibrancy. "A sense of personal belonging and social cohesiveness comes from well-defined neighborhoods and narrow, crowded, multi-use streets. Finally, basic urban vitality comes from residents' participation in an intricate 'street ballet,' a diurnal pattern of observable and comprehensible human activity that is possible only in places

like Jacobs' own Hudson Street in her beloved Greenwich Village."[12]

Oftentimes, if not done well, density has a detrimental impact on social flourishing. We do not have to look any farther than the failed attempts at public housing in the latter half of the twentieth century. These buildings became nothing more than vertical forms of concentrated poverty that greatly hindered social flourishing. In *Organizing the South Bronx* we read of the efforts of the South Bronx churches to *lessen* density because they knew this would lead to health and social flourishing. The book contains a very revealing quote gets to the heart of this in a straightforward and blunt (bordering on crass) manner:

> It is a fundamental fact; Lewis Mumford wrote this in the twenties, he said, "[High-rise apartments on] Park Ave. are great for rich people. They have all the options. The don't cause any trouble. But high density is extremely bad for poor people."

> If you are poor it means you've got problems. You put a lot of poor people in one place and you've got big problems. These people need to have a little air to breathe, a little room to move in.[13]

We can begin seeing how the built environment can be either healthy and helpful to social flourishing or as harmful as cancer. A look at what life in the city was like during the height of the Industrial Revolution reveals how bad planning

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[12] *The City Reader*, 105.

[13] Rooney, *Organizing the South Bronx*, 98.

and design can negatively impact the lives of city dwellers. Conversely, Jeb Brugmann in *Welcome to the Urban Revolution* points out the positives that the right kind of density can bring:

> Cities, relative to other forms of settlement, offer what we can simply call *urban advantage*. The further concentration of hundreds of millions in cities, whether through risk-taking squatter communities, multinational companies, ethnic groups, social movements, guerrilla movements, or transnational gangs, reflects the multitude of strategies to claim some bit of control over a city's urban advantage so they can leverage it *for their own advantage*. If we don't understand what makes up urban advantage, then we can't understand the City.[14]

While there is a fine line between too much and too little density, I don't want to back myself into a corner by suggesting that *only* neighborhoods or districts with buildings that are of a certain maximum height are (or should be) the result of the Gospel transforming the built environment. What I *am* attempting is to try and be practical and specific where possible so we can at least begin thinking about what kind of urban form is more healthy and helpful than others. I'm actually pro-density. We see how well it works in places like Toronto and Vancouver. But as to the fine line between too much and too little density, that's up for debate.

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[14] Brugmann, *Welcome to the Urban Revolution*, 24.

Healthy Urban Form Impacts Economic Flourishing

There is an intrinsic connection between the built environment of the city and economic forces. In some cases the right kind of urban form can lead to a flourishing of economic activity as seen in places like Portland and our robust artisan economy. Conversely, an economy built on rampant materialism and greed can adversely impact our cities. As Kunstler notes concerning the development of the American city in the mid-nineteenth century, "In a nation where the opportunity for personal profit knew no natural limit, unbridled economic forces were free to damage both nature and culture, and they accomplished this most visibly by degrading the urban setting."[15] Urban form can impact the local economy and the reverse is also true.

There is a benefit and a distinct advantage that cities have over most suburbs and rural settings. This advantage is called *agglomeration economies*. There is a magic in the clustering of businesses which the urban form in cities allows for. Brugmann notes:

> The first thing that anyone notices on entering a city is the concentration of people and their activities. Simple as it is, this density has been little understood, and its benefits are too often squandered through the low-density development of cities today. The density of cities is their most basic advantage over any kind of settlement. Without density of settlement, most of what

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15 Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere*, loc. 532.

we learn, produce, construct, organize, consume, and provide as a service in the world would simply be too expensive. Density increases the sheer *efficiency* by which we can pursue an economic opportunity.[16]

Most often as Christians we are not predisposed to thinking holistically about a life lived devoted and dedicated to the Lord. We compartmentalize things, separating our *physical* lives from our *spiritual* lives. Of course intellectually we know that this is not true in that we cannot surgically cut one from the other. We are spiritual, physical, social, emotional beings. But having become entrenched in this dichotomy we think of "church stuff" as spiritual and everything else as *not*. What that means is we fail to see how our finances and relationships, how we care for our cities and creation, and much more as being *equal* to everything else we label *spiritual* or "church stuff." As a result some of you may chafe at the thought that the Gospel ought to impact local economies.

As I mentioned previously, much of the magic of a city like Portland is found in our urban form. It seems to be the right mix to bolster our creative milieu which in turn has given rise to our distinct local economy. Charles Heying in *Brew to Bikes: Portland's Artisan Economy* notes, "we have a burgeoning artisan economy that lives happily alongside an older Portland of working class businesses and regular neighborhoods."[17] It can be argued on some levels that one of the factors is the correlation between the city's built

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[16] *Welcome to the Urban Revolution*, 27.

[17] Heying, *Brew to Bikes*, 14-15.

environment and this creative economy. Obviously this is the case with the powerhouse global megacities and their enormous economic output, like New York, London, Tokyo, and Hong Kong. It is true that one can simultaneously argue that a true vertically dense city is a great engine for both the local and the global economy.

I believe there is a direct connection between the built environment, the economy, and how this is something that God values and deems important. Leviticus and Deuteronomy disclose a distinct economic element to God's reign over Israel in the Promised Land. Their covenant relationship with God most definitively contained an economic component. This economic dimension really was an indicator of their worship of God. There was equity in their economy. But as soon as the people began drifting from the Lord one immediate outcome was the economic exclusion and oppression of the poor and vulnerable.

If an inequitable economy reveals a deeper and more insidious root cause (i.e., rebellion, worship of self) then can we at least contend that the power of the Gospel restores, heals, reconciles, redeems, and heals an unjust economy? We know from history that it took men and women who had been shaped by the Gospel who fought against inequitable and unjust economic systems such as the slave trade. When people are transformed by the Gospel they are not as tempted to be lured into bribery, corruption, selfish gain, and so on. Cities that are healthier in terms of their urban form provide the fertile soil for a stronger economy.

Healthy Urban Form Impacts Physical Flourishing

Lastly, there is little that can question the reality that the health or unhealth of a city's built environment impacts human flourishing when it comes to the physical lives of urban dwellers. We do not have to look far back in American history to see the detrimental effects on cities of such things as overcrowding and unsanitary conditions, the creation of ethnic slums through racial segregation and market exclusion, or even the coldness of suburban master-planned communities. Charles Montgomery poignantly asserts that, "Life satisfaction is strongly influenced by location."[18]   He the drives home the importance of how urban form impacts our ability to thrive in cities:

> The city is not merely as repository of pleasures. It is the stage on which we fight our battles, where we act out the drama of our own lives. It can enhance or corrode our ability to cope with everyday challenges. It can steal our autonomy or give us the freedom to thrive. It can offer a navigable environment, or it can create a series of impossible gauntlets that wear us down daily. The message encoded in architecture and systems can foster a sense of mastery or helplessness. The good city should be measured not only by its distractions and amenities but also by how it affects this everyday drama or survival, work, and meaning.[19]

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[18] Montgomery, *Happy City*, loc. 526.

[19] Ibid., loc. 561.

There is little denying the power of the built environment of our cities and its impact on our happiness or flourishing. Again, the root cause of much that is wrong with our built environments can be attributed to greed, an unjust economy, a disregard for the vulnerable, materialism or excessiveness, and so on. This flourishing is more than warm feelings of happiness, which we would certainly do well not to minimize, but it also involves a sense of safety and security. Jane Jacobs writes, "The bedrock attribute of a successful city district is that a person must feel personally safe and secure on the street among all these strangers. He must not feel automatically menaced by them. A city district that fails in this respect also does badly in other ways and lays up for itself, and for its city at large, mountain on mountain of trouble."[20]

In some ways this last point really is the premise of this entire book. The Gospel *can* impact the built environment of the city which in turn leads to a greater sense of flourishing. If we did a quick survey of cities, whether across this continent or in developing countries, we would see a direct correlation between human suffering and poor living conditions that are directly tied to urban form. That was one of the incentives for suburbanization here in the US because living in the city had lost its glamor. Many sought to get away from the industrial cores in favor of fresher air, better living conditions, and a safer habitat. Unfortunately we have now discovered that the sedentary auto-based suburban

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[20] Jacobs, "The Uses of Sidewalks: Safety," 106-107.

lifestyle has led to widespread psychological and physical health issues. We jumped out of one frying pan into another.

So now it's time to ask: What would the built "city of God" look like? This is not a wistful longing for some Old Testament-style theocracy, but rather an exploration as to what a block, a street, a neighborhood, a district or an entire city could look like once it's been influenced and transformed by the Gospel.

Chapter 9

Building the City of God

All over the world Christians are engaged in city building whether intentionally or not or even whether they realize it or not. The scale on which this is taking place includes refurbishing or retrofitting an aging church building; rebuilding a church campus or building a new one from scratch; building or adapting a central city apartment complex for affordable housing; building schools, orphanages, or hospitals in developing countries; and tearing down a condemned structure and replacing it with a mixed-use building that houses retail, market rate condos, and space for a church to meet. Most would not envision themselves as "building the city of God" or anything grandiose like that. However, in their construction, adaptation, retrofitting, or refurbishing they are in some ways either doing so along the lines of a Kingdom meta-narrative or simply not thinking through the impact that design can have in furthering or hindering the Gospel.

This chapter delves into this idea of building the city of God, but more or less on the smaller scale of development or redevelopment projects, retrofits, adaptive reuse, and the like.

Keep in mind that I am not a developer, architect, realtor, or planner. My intention is to think through with you some of the underlying values that are essential in these kinds of projects. In other words, whether you're a leader in a church, on a local church committee or team overseeing a construction or redevelopment project, or a Christian living in the city thinking through ways to make positive change in your neighborhood, I want to set forth some values. I want to ask, if you *were* part of this elusive "city of God" what would it look like? What form or shape would it take? Would it be noticeably different?

In their book *American Urban Form* authors Sam Bass Warner and Andrew Whittemore trace the development of the urban form of American cities beginning in the 17th century. They point out the shaping force that urban form has. They write, "This book is about patterns, the physical patterns or 'urban form' that we can observe in American big cities past and present. It is also about the social, political, economic, and other human patterns that these physical patterns share and are themselves shaped by in turn."[1]

Conversely, the political, economic, and social culture of the city (or neighborhood) also impacts urban form. What that means is that the church, based on the prevalent reality of the Kingdom meta-narrative, *can* impact urban form which in turn shapes and influences the neighborhood and city. Keep in mind that I am not suggesting this as a green light for the church to strong-arm its way into political inner circles and then using its presence to force "religion" down

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[1] Warner and Whittemore, *American Urban Form*, loc. 135.

peoples' throats. Instead, it's more like the subtle mustard-seed nature of the Kingdom of God: seeking to plant these Kingdom seeds into the landscape of the city. This is where we live out the Gospel and when possible talk about the Gospel and how it is a motivating factor for our involvement in the city.

So what would it look like to sow these Kingdom seeds into our cities through urban form? What traits, characteristics, or attributes need to be at hand that would shape and influence our projects? Again, these could range from multi-million dollar mixed-use redevelopment projects to next-to-nothing guerrilla or tactical urbanism projects in the neighborhood. If we begin thinking through our values and motives then it should shape what our projects will look like.

I believe that there are six immediate values that should guide our involvement in shaping the city's built environment. The goal should be to think through each value and ensure that they are factored into each project regardless or how large or small they might be. I will list them here first before going into more detail: *justice, inclusivity, accessibility, community, enhancing the local neighborhood, and economic development.*

Justice

This is the overarching theme that informs and influences the rest. While this is a topic explored earlier in the book I want to reiterate its importance and place in how we equitably build neighborhoods, districts, and cities today.

Fortunately, God's common grace is powerfully at work in the built environment. It's a topic I read about on a daily basis from such outlets as *City Lab*, *Grist*, *Next City, New Geography, Sustainable Cities Collective,* and so many more. Having spent all of 2013 assisting an urban sustainability pilot project working with cities across the country, I can testify that the topic of justice or equity in the built environment was one of the most frequently discussed topics. Professors, urban planners, developers, and other city leaders all talked about it. So how do churches and Christians weave this topic into their individual roles in shaping the urban form?

I recently came across an article with the catchy title of "Evangelical Urbanism: A Review of the Downtown Project's Las Vegas Revival." While this project lately has fallen on hard times, the vision of the unofficial "Mayor of Downtown Las Vegas" nails the appeal of creating an enticing built environment experience. Even though he mixes up the uses of the words "evangelical" with "evangelism" the point is still well taken: "It's something I want to call 'evangelical urbanism'—where a particular type of resident is working hard to build a brand-new, very specific urban culture to lure additional, similar residents. The Downtown Project is working hard both to recruit new followers and to convert local nonbelievers. It's exciting, energizing, and, I believe, totally earnest in its goals to make the city a better place for all."[2]

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2 Walker, "Evangelical Urbanism," para. 5.

I dig that: creating such a vibrant and inviting place where others *want* to go to live and work as well as play. What if the church, the true brokers of all things involving evangelism, took on that motif when thinking through altering and improving their immediate built environment? On top of that, what about creating zones or districts of inclusivity (the next value we'll look at) where the value of justice means that everyone has access to this area regardless of ethnicity or whether they're rich or poor? That kind of justice, *God's justice*, is the overarching value and influence for how we approach the city and building or rebuilding blighted or struggling communities.

Inclusivity

On Thursday nights I have been teaching a class called *Understanding the City* at North Portland Bible College. The college has its roots in the black American church and started in inner North/Northeast Portland at a time when it was the black community of Portland. It was an educational institution for pastors and lay leaders in the area's black churches. Since gentrification has been in full force the past two decades this once predominantly black community has become significantly racially mixed and the student body of the college reflects that as well.

Last night we spent time exploring the question "what makes a city great?" Interestingly one of the first responses was from a woman who was born in the South and moved to Portland where she has been in the same house since the early 1970s. As a proud black American woman (she prefers

the label "black American" over "African American") she talked about how one of the markers of a great city is found in its tolerance, that the more cities are tolerant of not only different ethnicities but even different sexual orientations the better cities are because they are more inclusive.

Researchers and writers like Richard Florida have been beating that drum as well. They show that the most tolerant cities also tend to be the most vibrant and economically strong. In other words, there seems to be a direct correlation between tolerance and the allure of the city. We find this true in such places ranging from Portland to Toronto. How then does the church respond? Also, how does this value find itself into how we plan or build our neighborhoods, districts, and cities so that reflect Kingdom values? We love ... we invite ... we include regardless of one's identity, ethnicity or orientation. We display the love of Christ in how we plan our retrofits, new development projects, and the like. I believe in doing so we call people to Christ and let the Holy Spirit sort out the rest.

I know this may chafe some of the more conservative evangelicals among whom I unashamedly include myself, but I tire of hearing stories of gay or lesbian friends moving into declined central city neighborhoods to *escape* the persecution of evangelical Christians in the suburbs. Really? Is that what God has called us to?

Obviously this is just a part of the tolerance conversation, but this is the reality of the cities we live in. Are we building formidable castles in the city that are accessible only by the "inside royalty" (the church) or how inclusive are we at making our projects to serve the least, the

last, and the lost? If we're building a community health center, an art gallery, a new micro-restaurant, or coffee roaster as a Gospel-centered initiative then are we inviting *all* to come and partake?

Accessibility

Building off the last point, not only do we want our projects to be marked by inclusivity, but in order for them to be inclusive they also need to be accessible. Again, this notion of inclusivity is not simply about tolerance. It also includes the different age groups as well as the different socio-economic strata. You see, you could have a great idea for a project but if the only way people can access it is with a car then immediately you're being exclusive because you're marginalizing those who cannot afford cars. Obviously in auto-dominated suburbs or rural areas this is something altogether different, but the question you need to wrestle with is "how accessible is it?"

Just this morning I was reading Kunstler's *The Geography of Nowhere* where he noted the political climate in the 1980s and how the economic engine was predicated upon expanded automobile usage:

> [President Ronald] Reagan professed to believe literally in the fundamentalist Christian doctrine that the end of the world was at hand. At the very least, this should have called into question his concern for the nation's long-term welfare. Unburdened by such mundane cares, he cast aside all restraint in the pursuit of economic "growth," and financed the next phase of suburban

> expansion by encouraging the greatest accumulation of
> debt in world history.[3]

Kunstler's point was Reagan wanted to focus on short-term or immediate results *now* and at the same time not think about the future implications of what this would mean to the typical American family. Fast forward the storyline to today and there is much that we can trace in regards to poor health, lack of proper exercise, and a sedentary lifestyle to these decisions to invest in the auto industry, build the suburbs, and further our transition into a car-dominated society.

However, not everyone can afford this lifestyle. Since on average it costs North Americans between $8,000-$10,000 a year to own and maintain a car it means that for many this is a luxury and not an option. Therefore they are dependent upon mass transit, walking, and bicycling to get to work, get groceries, visit the doctor, and so on. If we're creating the "blueprints of a just city" then one of the values we need to ensure is imbedded into what we are doing is this notion of *accessibility*. If our churches (buildings, gathering, church life) are only accessible by a car-oriented populace then immediately you're *inclusive* to some but *exclusive* to others simply on the basis of accessibility.

Yesterday I had coffee with a pastor who leads a suburban congregation. He told me the story of how this church was once located in the heart of what used to be a downtown bedroom community. In the push to be a large attractional regional megachurch they moved out of the

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[3] Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere*, loc. 1773.

downtown, bought fifteen acres, and built a sprawling campus. Decades later they are exploring options of what to do with this expansive tract of land that lies along the corridor of this suburb's plan to create a mixed-use pedestrian-oriented district full of buildings with businesses on the ground floor and residences above.

I suggested that maybe the church could think through how to advance the city's plans by aligning the use of their property accordingly. What if they dedicated a corner of their property to house a pod of food carts? How could they activate their site to be more pedestrian-friendly? This would make their property more accessible to a larger swath of society, and it would have even more uses than what it has currently.

The bottom line on accessibility is to think through how any projects you're leading or part of can be as accessible to the greatest number of people regardless of their ethnicity, socio-economic status, or mode of transportation.

Community

Continuing to build on the previous two values, inclusivity and accessibility really are part of creating projects that foster interconnectivity or ... *community*. Having lived in the same mixed-use building for almost three years now we continue to watch as the neighborhood transforms before our eyes. To call it gentrification would not be fair since no one is being pushed out. Empty lots are being turned into four-story apartments. There were signs of a slow turnaround already at hand when we moved into this neighborhood, but

with the opening of a Whole Foods and a Trader Joe's (as well as condos) the pace at which this change is taking place is only accelerating (or so it feels to us).

One of the reasons why we were drawn to this neighborhood was its ease of access to light rail, bike lanes and routes, grocery stores, and other businesses. Now mind you, there are a lot of gaps in the urban fabric such as surface-level parking, but this is changing before our eyes. The built environment of this neighborhood actually fosters and *invites* community simply through design and appropriate density.

The building we live in is a four-story mixed-use building that once stood virtually alone. It was surrounded by parking lots, single-family detached homes on one side, and one-story businesses. There was no sense of feeling hemmed in (in a comforting sort of way), but that has changed and continues to change. On one side of us a new four-story apartment building went in over the past year (just two blocks away from another brand-new four-story residential building). That means that the sidewalk life, already mixed in with foot traffic to the library and the coffee shop on the bottom floor of our building, continues to become more energized and enriching.

The same storyline is now unfolding on the other side of us as another five-story residential building is under construction. Now that the workers are already putting up the second story there has been an immediate noticeable difference. From an expansive (but small) vacant lot we now have a vibrant, encroaching, canyon-like feel on two sides of us. Also, since these buildings are all four to five stories, this

"canyon" is pleasant and not overwhelming. It is amazing how the streetscape all around us is being transformed.

With more people walking, biking, and chatting throughout the neighborhood the streetscape is more vibrant and active. With these new buildings the density increases, but on a good scale ... the *human scale*. These new buildings are just the "right height" where they activate but do not intimidate. They foster a greater sense of energy as well as connectivity.

It continues to amaze me how the built environment of our neighborhoods really shape our urban existence. Too much or too little density leads to isolation and anonymity. But the right mixture of density, building heights, and amenities really accentuate and enhance life in the city. For this we continue to be grateful to be able to live life on this human scale.

But where I want to briefly take this conversation is to the role of the church in creating neighborhoods like this, particularly those churches that own land and buildings in the city. How are you making your neighborhood more livable which in turn fosters community? Have you thought through how you can alter the urban experience on the human scale in your neighborhood? What would it look like to alter or enhance or retrofit your building in such a way that fosters connectivity in the neighborhood? Maybe you'd discover that outreach becomes a lot easier than you thought.

Enhancing the Local Neighborhood

In a successive manner, each value builds on one another ... justice, inclusivity, accessibility, and community. What this does is collectively enhance the neighborhood. There is a cumulative effect. In enhancing the local neighborhood I am not simply speaking of the built environment, but this in turn influences and impacts the lives of those who call the community home. It raises the social capital in the neighborhood and bolsters the neighborhood's image and civic pride. Again, this is all because of an inclusive and accessible built environment.

Kunstler drives home the importance of the value of the human scale and where we've gone awry: "Americans have been living car-centered lives for so long that the collective memory of what used to make a landscape or a townscape or even a suburb humanly rewarding has nearly been erased."[4] When approaching how to utilize or build space are you thinking through whether it is built for cars or will it be pedestrian-oriented? You see, the latter is much more inclusive, accessible, activating, and vibrant than the former.

If your value is certainly to enhance the local neighborhood then it will force you to think through "how?" How will your decisions enhance or hinder your neighborhood? If it is a central city neighborhood church and yet most people drive in from outside the area how does this make the neighbors feel? Does it invite them or repel them? I'm not saying it is wrong to drive autos to church and

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[4] *The Geography of Nowhere*, loc. 1817.

nor do I harbor conspiracy theories about this, but these are simply questions we need to wrestle with as we seek to weave the Gospel story into the built environment of our neighborhood and city.

How will or can your building, campus, facility, or project actually bring value to the neighborhood and enhance it? Certainly renovation projects for historic buildings do help immensely. They create a greater sense of civic and neighborhood pride as you beautify the area. But I want to you think through the next several steps after that as you wrestle with these questions: How else can we enhance the neighborhood? Are we building social capital in our neighborhood? Does our project make the neighborhood more vibrant and inclusive (or exclusive)? How integrated is it with the rest of the neighborhood? Is it built for cars or people? Is it on the human scale?

Economic Development

The last value that I want to encourage you to think through is in regards to local economic development. That is, how are you promoting a heightened sense of localism in what you're doing? This must be a value woven through whatever project that you're leading or a part of. Again, as we explored earlier in the book, the ramifications of the Gospel and Gospel renewal in our cities are more than about merely populating heaven.

Last night during my *Understanding the City* class we simply unpacked the mixed bag of what gentrification brings to our community ... both its tensions and its blessings.

Some were leery about some of the challenges this process has brought about and is bringing to this once predominantly African American neighborhood. On the other hand, several homeowners who have been there for decades shared how they were not only grateful for how much their home values have skyrocketed, but also for all the new businesses that have come in, as well as the new neighbors and more people moving into the neighborhood. They vividly remember that it was not too long ago when many services and businesses had pulled out.

Bringing economic stabilization, vitality, or growth is essential for the health of a neighborhood. "When cities first arose, they created a distinct kind of human life within their walled, protected space. Out of this dense proximity flowed three signal features that mark urban life."[5] These signal features represent the best intentions of the way urban life was and is meant to function: safety and stability, diversity, and productivity and creativity. Joel Kotkin also points out that there are definitive markers which are found in those cities that not only are surviving but thriving … "the sacredness of place, the ability to provide security and project power, and last, the animating role of commerce."[6] The strength of the economy is a pivotal feature for the overall health and vitality of the city.

To discuss "building the city of God" means that we must take into consideration *all* of what makes cities stable and healthy. A quick survey through Leviticus or

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[5] Keller, *Center Church*, 135-136.

[6] *The City*, xxi.

Deuteronomy reveals that a just economy was a central feature of how God's people were to live in covenant relationship with God. There was no separation between "spiritual" activities and "physical" or "everyday" activities. They were all one and the same. The Gospel speaks to more than transitioning our membership to heaven after this life is over; it invades and renews every aspect of life and culture here and now.

These values are foundational for the Kingdom's role in city building. My intention is for us to collectively think through what shapes and informs our involvement in the city regardless of what scale is involved. While this is not an exhaustive list it will hopefully animate conversations as to how churches can shape the built environment of the city. With that said, the last chapter specifically addresses the role of the church in creating a just city.

Chapter 10

The Church's Role in Creating a Just City

Church history is chock full of grand successes where the church has shone the brightest in its darkest hours. On the other hand, there have been a myriad of occasions where the church was (and is) responsible for many abuses, corrupt practices, social injustices, cover-ups, and so much more. A quick tour through media and social media outlets reveal that this still takes place whether the church involved is Protestant or Catholic. However, we can and should affirm that throughout history (and today) the church was (and is) a force for positive change when fueled by the Gospel.

A walk through many of our cities showcase where the church not only was interwoven into the urban fabric of the city, but actually played a role in shaping the built environment of the city as well as the culture at large. Granted, on some levels this is a controversial assertion. Take the province of Québec for example. The province and the Québécois have been significantly shaped by the presence and role of the Catholic church. While for the most part there has been an outright rejection of this religious institution in the last fifty to sixty years there is no denying

that much of the underlying values, culture, and lingering institutions were shaped by the church. One example is Université Laval. The roots of this university go back to the Séminaire de Québec founded in 1663 by François de Montmorency-Laval, a member of the House of Laval and the first Bishop of New France. Can we altogether throw out the baby with the bathwater? Can we at least affirm places and moments throughout history where the church significantly shaped and impacted society not only culturally but in urban form?

Throughout this final chapter we will trek through history looking at similar examples in order to give today's church ideas, models, and encouraging ways that they too can play a role in shaping and influencing the city's built environment. In affirming the positive nature of these examples and epochs in church history I realize I run the risk of being seen to be downplaying the negative aspects, and I want to acknowledge that up front. This is not an in-depth historical look where every angle is considered and I am simply turning a blind eye to some of the negative undercurrents at hand. Rather, what I do want to point out and affirm, based on the trajectory of this book, is where the church decisively (or subtly) impacted the built environment of the city. The goal is to provide ideas for the church today to go and do likewise.

The rest of this chapter then are snapshots that are not only historical in nature but also give practical suggestions for today. In other words, we will look at examples from church history all the while extracting nuggets and ideas that can be used for today.

Embedding in the City

The early Christians found themselves living in cities across the Roman Empire. Marked by a radical new Gospel ethic, the church was involved in small-scale transformation projects that many, even though they were suspicious of Christianity, still noted and affirmed. Did the early church impact the urban form of cities? That's doubtful although there may very well be cases and instances, but that is not the point I am trying to make.

The foundation of influencing cities is simply our presence in the city, our being rooted and placed in the urban context. When we read of the early church we find a wide variety of ways that they enacted Gospel renewal in the cities they called home, whether caring for widows to rescuing unwanted babies abandoned on the streets and in trash dumps and raising them as their own children. It would be difficult to influence cities, no matter the scale of the projects, if we did not embed in them seeking their peace, welfare, and prosperity. This is often overlooked.

The most essential foundation for our role today in influencing the city is simply to be present. To actually live in the city. On the one hand this is generic and pertains to all parts of the city, whether urban, suburban, or exurban. On the other hand, this is a call to move into every part of the city in need of Gospel renewal. This could range from old inner-ring suburbs that have become the landing place for the poor and new immigrants to the still-struggling central city neighborhoods. Throughout church history to the present day noble examples are to be found of Christians

moving into the cities, whether the slums in developing countries or low-income neighborhoods in North American cities, to be a witness (in word and deed) of the transforming power of Jesus Christ.

Building a Better City

Throughout history Christians have found themselves in positions to influence the built environment of the city as architects, politicians, planners, and the like. It's problematic to quantify their role in shaping their cities. These figures, much like Daniel or Nehemiah or Joseph in the Old Testament, were high-ranking government officials. They influenced and wrote policies, made decisions about the national economy, and led in the roles that God sovereignly placed them in. Nehemiah did specifically impact the built environment of Jerusalem, leading in the reconstruction not only of its walls, but also in revitalizing the struggling nation's economy.

Today I constantly run into and connect with people in similar positions of influence. I have had conversations with numerous urban and transportation planners who continuously work on projects that impact the lives of thousands or tens of thousands of people, and even an entire city. Not only that, but through their professions and crafts they are literally impacting the built environment of their cities. In private conversations they have shared how they wrestle with how to integrate their faith and their work. They have an awareness that God cares for the least and the last, and whether they are working on bike lanes in a low-income

neighborhood or a larger-scale light rail project, this reality influences their decisions on a daily basis.

I am also connecting with a growing number of people who are in school to study urban planning, architecture, or community development. Much of our conversations (again) revolve around processing how they can integrate their faith with their studies and work. They want the Gospel to impact how they view the city, how they design, how they plan, and how they build. This is truly on the same level of calling that I find with people who enter occupational ministry as a pastor, church planter, or missionary.

What if churches called out and empowered more (indeed *so many* more) people along the lines of these professions who can impact and influence the city? We can easily point to past and present examples of the great injustices have been enacted in urban form. So what do you think it would look like having more people who are being transformed by the Gospel in these decision-making seats of power and influence?

Shaping the Growth of the City

At times the church has played a role in shaping the growth of cities and the resultant built environment. This builds off the last section by pointing out some specific examples where the church in history impacted urban form. The earliest case study that I looked at stems from the role of the church in two towns in England from roughly the seventh to the eleventh centuries. Through archaeological findings and historical accounts the authors Baker and Holt

in *Urban Growth and the Medieval Church* ask, "Was the Church's contribution in any way distinctive? Was there such a thing as ecclesiastical town-planning? Our conclusion is that there was not—that there was just town-planning by ecclesiastics. Town-planning ventures promoted by Church institutions seem no different, and depart from 'ideal' plans no more and no less than their secular equivalents."[1]

While initially they commented that it was hard to distinguish specifically the role of the church in the development of these towns, they also note:

> At the risk of stating the obvious, we would reiterate the generally accepted (and nonetheless true) point that medieval town life and culture were inseparable from the Church and churches. And although that theme— amply explored by other and abler historians and archaeologists—lay outside the intention and scope of this study, we are fully aware of how far the development of the varied pattern of urban church was an aspect of the distinct identity developed by the emerging urban communities of the greater towns. If we have placed our emphasis on the range and scope of the Church's direct contribution to the physical shape of the town, that is not to deny either the Church's essential contribution to urban culture, nor the impact that that culture itself had on the urban form. It was the impact of the Church as institution we set out to study, not the more subtle and even less measurable impact of Christian belief and practice on the town-planners. Only occasionally have we pointed to possible circumstances under which a Christian mentality influenced the planning process.[2]

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[1] Baker and Holt, *Urban Growth and the Medieval Church*, 376.

[2] Ibid., 376-377.

Throughout the book the authors attempt to dissect historical accounts and archaeological findings to determine exactly the church's role in how these towns developed. What these quotations reveal is that while this was difficult to determine with any precision, since the church was interwoven into society, one cannot conclude that the church had no influence at all. There were at least instances where the physical property of churches was developed and expanded which in turn did influence how the town grew in its built environment as that growth moved through and past the church property. That said, the authors found it problematic to navigate through the layers and nuances of the church's role in society and how it may or may not have impacted the built environment of these medieval towns.

What this brings to the forefront is that whether intentional or not, on a small scale or a large scale, noticeable or not, the church *has* influenced and *can* influence the physical layout of cities. Obviously in this historical case study it was negligible at best, but it is still noteworthy. This is a challenge for churches to think through in terms of how to use their space and the impact and influence that their space might have on the neighborhood.

The Civil Society

Designing a civil society is fraught with debate and controversy. Ultimately it is some entity or group, often today viewed as *outsiders*, who seek to impose upon local inhabitants what truly is this idea of a civil society. What

many long for is a healthy, life-giving, inclusive, economically growing, and helpful city. So how does one's theological beliefs influence this conversation? How does the church influence this end without browbeating others and remaining openhanded whether people agree with their theological convictions or not? In other words, how can we shape the conversation even if it means many or most will not in turn follow and worship God?

In early American history there was a group of people whose theological beliefs in God played an instrumental role in shaping the built environment of the towns, villages, and even the architecture of their housing, meeting houses, and places of worship. What was immediately noticeable was how their belief in God and his reality directly influenced how they not only coordinated and promoted community life, but even in how they plotted out their towns and built their homes. "For the Puritans, architectural structures were a microcosm of God's exacting structure for the universe and a constant reminder of the way He wanted them to live."[3] The reason why this is a key observation is because here was a group of people who distinctly translated their beliefs into action and in this case it altered and influenced the built environment of their towns and villages. "The Puritan leaders established a system that linked most aspects of daily life with more abstract issues of religious sentiment, social order, and family bonds."[4]

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[3] Wright, *Building the Dream*, 3-4.

[4] Ibid., 4.

What was abundantly clear was that their faith system translated directly into their everyday lives. It was more than a rote piety, but rather the physical realm was an outflow of the spiritual. Now was this on the level of how we view today's urban planners? In some ways yes and in some ways no. What we do know was that the Puritans' belief system influenced how they plotted their towns, how they designed their homes, and overall how everything in the built environment was arranged.

> Within a few years of settlement, the elaborate structuring of the town had extended to architecture. The meeting house was always the first important building to be erected, and it was a consistent form from one settlement to another. Unlike Anglican churches, with their steeples and elegant Baroque ornament, the meeting house was an unpretentious structure, for the Puritans did not believe that human beings had the right to consecrate buildings. The church was the congregation, not the structure where they worshipped. In many ways, the meeting house looked like a large dwelling. Since religion extended to every aspect of life, and the building was not considered sacred, it was the site for many other public assemblies, and often for schools, in addition to religious services.[5]

While Puritans have been commonly perceived as a legalistic and rather solemn bunch, in fact their architecture reflected a different side of them. "Puritan houses, like their owners' lives, embraced both order and playfulness, solemnity and exuberance, delicate detail and forthright structure. Just

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5 Ibid., 9.

as this group created an elaborate 'morphology of conversion,' in which each stage of God's grace was made visible and recognizable through a set of signs, so too the New England colonists leaned toward a literalness in the houses they built and the towns they planned."[6] The Puritans reveal a clear example of church-based urban planning.

Obviously one could poke holes in this argument by pointing out that those who shared this belief system came together to set up towns in the same way the Mormons plotted out and built Salt Lake City to the point of excluding any and all who did not share their beliefs. However, the goal of this section is simply to point out examples of church-based urban planning and community development. Certainly the Puritans, regardless of whether or not there were non-Puritans present in their towns, they still qualify as a worthy example because of how they directly involved the church in urban planning. What they sought to do was the create a civil society.

Conduits of Common Grace

From the first Pentecost onward God's people have been instrumental in establishing institutions of common grace. These society-shaping institutions have had such an impact that every city and nation have been and are being deeply impacted by their presence. Today many of these institutions still act as conduits of God's common and prevenient grace in shaping society. Their physical presence is a faint reminder

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[6] Ibid., 17.

of bygone eras when the church played a greater role in shaping society. This is not a cry for the "good old days" or a nostalgic reminiscence of what once was. Instead, I want to point out how the church continues to act as a conduit of common grace.

Consider the meteoric rise of the Catholic Church in Québec. Up until the mid-to-late twentieth century the church played an enormous role in shaping Québec society. "The Québecois population trusted members of the Church unconditionally, as much for what they represented as a whole as for what they were individually: the elite of society. In short, the Church was at the time the unchallenged leader of the whole of Québec."[7] While this was predominantly a cultural and even a spiritual influence, is there any evidence of how the built environment of any of its towns or cities were affected by the work of the church? Several books, articles, and theses I read pertained specifically to the history of the Catholic Church in Québec. They show how the church not only shaped society but responded to such global movements of modernism and the growth of capitalism.

While there was ample evidence that the Catholic Church in Québec built church buildings, colleges, hospitals, and so on could this be viewed as the same as church-based urban planning? I don't think so. Recently I came across an out-of-print book entitled *The Role of the Church in New France* by Cornelius Jaenan and published by the Canadian Historical Society (Société historique du Canada) in 1985. The book analyzes the role of the Roman Catholic Church

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[7] Dubuc, *Brother André*, 6.

in New France and how it shaped the Québec we know today. Jaenan starts off by noting:

> Nowadays, a church is seen as a voluntary association of people for the worship of God and the pursuit of religious activities. In New France, particularly in its Acadian, Canadian, and upper country sectors, the Roman Catholic Church was the exclusive institutional expression after 1627 of the religious and spiritual life of the colonial population. Its activities touched all aspects of life—social, economic, political, demographic, as well as religious. The role of the church was so comprehensive and pervading to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that some historians have concluded that is was the dominant force in the French colony.[8]

This sounds similar to the examples of the two English towns between the seventh and eleventh centuries mentioned above in that it is difficult to extract from the evidence the role and influence of the church from that of society. In terms of plotting out the city, architecture, infrastructure, and so forth could we ever really know whether and to what degree the church's leaders influenced city politicians and planners as to how the city should be built? What we do know of the Catholic Church in Québec was that it established many institutions that still shape Québécois society today including hospitals, universities, orphanages, and so on. But while these were important and necessary, that's something different from an overall urban plan.

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[8] Jaenan, *The Role of the Church in New France*, 3.

While these examples do not reflect urban planning in how we view the profession today, what is clear is that at times the church has played a role in shaping the built environment of the city. In at least one instance (the Puritans) the motivation was distinctly theological in nature. But overall it is apparent churches had at best a minimal and sporadic impact on urban planning. For the most part churches today lack the influence and power to shape the built environment of the city beyond their immediate building or campus.

Afterword

The more my travel schedule continues to pick up the more I find myself spending time in downtowns and central city neighborhoods across North America. Since I work almost exclusively with urban churches one of the encouraging highlights is that in the myriad of conversations and teaching opportunities we share together there is an innate desire for these churches to play a strategic role in influencing the city with the Gospel. This is more than one-on-one evangelism or church growth through conversions, but rather a longing to see the Gospel renew and redeem what is broken in cities. Many are acutely aware that this entails the physical and economic dimensions of the city.

Recently in a trip to a large MidSouth city I spent time with a pair of church planters who are active in their denominations and are both involved in the same church network. At a recent regional gathering of those in their network they both came to the conclusion that many of their peers are still caught up in lessons and conversations about preaching, how to tweak their worship gatherings a certain way, church assimilation and membership processes, and so on. They told me that their heart longed for something else.

They longed to see Gospel renewal in their cities that was more than packing out worship gatherings, but simultaneously seeing the Gospel interplay with the built environment of their city such as in spurring on urban revitalization, economic renewal, a more robust active transportation network, and more. They left this gathering thinking and dreaming about this.

Blueprints for a Just City was not written because I undervalue the importance of evangelism, church growth, or creative worship gatherings. Instead, my goal as the thoughts and ideas of this book continue to simmer in your imagination is that *in addition* to what I just listed we'd begin thinking, dreaming, planning, and praying for the Gospel to take on flesh and blood and move into the neighborhood, to paraphrase John 1:14 of *The Message*. My hope is that we would recognize that the ramifications of Gospel renewal are not restricted to only what we deem to be spiritual, but that we'd make the connections to not only the physical dimensions of life and the city, but also how the Good News of our risen Savior can impact the built environment of the city.

Two nights ago I returned from yet again another trip to Montréal and Québec City. As we drove through Saint-Roch and walked around Basse-Ville (Lower Town) in Québec City I couldn't but help enjoy the walkability and vibrant urban fabric of these 17th century streets. Places like this are magnets for residents and tourists alike. Something within us simply *knows* what a healthy, active, and appealing built environment is. My hope is that this book would stimulate you as Christians, whether you're a church leader

or not, to dream wildly about the ways the Gospel can redeem, renew, and beautify our cities in keeping with the trajectory of God's cosmic renewal plan. May we be full participants in the Kingdom of God.

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Coffee and bicycles define Sean's urban existence who believes the best way for exploring cities is on the seat of a bicycle as well as hanging out in third wave coffee shops. Sean is an urban missiologist who works in a creative partnership between TEAM as the Developer of Urban Strategy and Training and the Upstream Collective leading the PDX Loft.

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