Cities, Aesthetics, and Human Community

Some Thoughts on the Limits of Design

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> *In experience, human relations, institutions and traditions are as much apart of the nature in which we live as is the physical world. But there are multitudes of ways of participating in [nature], and these ways are characteristic not only of various experiences of the same individual, but of attitudes of aspiration, need and achievement that belong to civilizations in their collective aspect.*
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> – Dewey (1980, 333)
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> *Many, many human beings are not thriving in the city, in fact they are barely surviving … It is obvious that [the late-capitalist city is] eating its own children in order to satisfy the unquestioned demands of a market economy made manic by global greed.*
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> – Grange (1999, 193)
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> *In general, you can tell what really scares a society – its collective vision of the dangerous other – by examining its architectural arrangements for exclusion and isolation.*
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> – Mitchell (2005, 49)

Over recent decades there has been much concern in the United States about the crisis of cities. Among the many problems facing us are: sprawl, loss of farm and wilderness lands, increasing racial and economic separation, increasing demands on infrastructure, time lost to commuting, loss of financial resources, and the waning of community.

In the following essay, two possible responses to this crisis are examined: New Urbanism and Civic Environmentalism. New Urbanism because it is the most visible and highly touted strategy, and Civic environmentalism because, I argue, it holds out the promise of helping guide a better response. I offer explications of the central ideas of each, examine how persons working within either framework might respond to the problems facing cities, and evaluate the proposed solutions.

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1 Crisis of Cities

1.1 Introduction

Much has been written, especially in the United States, about the crisis of cities, about the many problems facing our largely automobiled cities. This is not the crisis of the late 1970s. It is not the crisis of cities burning, runaway inflation and cultural "malaise." Rather, the crisis is described as one of sprawl, loss of farm and wilderness lands, increasing racial and economic separation, increasing demands on infrastructure, time lost to commuting, loss of financial resources, the waning of community, and an ever more fractured political life.

I will begin by briefly discussing this crisis, and hint at the role of suburbanization in this process. I will then consider two possible responses: New Urbanism and Civic Environmentalism. In the end, I will suggest that of these Civic Environmentalism is a better response, better in large part because while the problems we face are problems of design and planning, they are neither exclusively, nor even mainly, such.

1.2 Sprawl

Over the last 75 years, cities in the United States have sprawled. The growth of population explains about 31 percent of the growth in land area of US urban areas in the last 20 years. Even those areas that experienced no population growth have increased in urbanized land area by an average of 18 percent (Ewing et al., 2000). Data collected by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for its State of the Cities 2000 report show that urban areas are expanding at about twice the rate that the population is growing (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2000). Development patterns have emphasized single-use development, with pods of commercial, housing, public, and other spaces all developed independently. One of the reasons for sprawl, and one of the upshots of it, is our ever-continuing love affair with individual motor vehicle transportation (Boarnet and Haughwout, 2000; Heavner, 2000). The automobile carries people from one space to another, stringing out social experience and mapping a community with no center and no edge. Sprawling growth patterns eat land, increase travel time and cost, make walking both more difficult and dangerous, and lead to greater pollution levels (Surface Transportation Policy Project, 2002; Office of Technology Assessment, 1994; Moffet and Miller, 1993; MacKenzie et al., 1992; Litman, 1992; Ketcham and Komanoff, 1992). Sprawl also exacerbates social separations. Living patterns become increasingly segregated along racial lines (Berube, 2001), and along economic lines (Frey, 2001; Glaeser, 2001). Further, as the sprawl continues, older, inner ring suburbs now face many of the same problems as the central city (Boarnet and Haughwout, 2000; Heavner, 2000).

Consider Atlanta. From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, Atlanta grew 32%, in population. During the 1990s alone, the region doubled in size from 65 miles north