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# Humanum

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BOOK REVIEW

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## City of God, City of Man

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**Philip Bess**, *Till We Have Built Jerusalem: Architecture, Urbanism, and the Sacred* (ISI Books, 2006).

Philip Bess, a professor of architecture at the University of Notre Dame, argues forcefully and winsomely in his essay collection *Till We Have Built Jerusalem: Architecture, Urbanism, and the Sacred*, that the city is the most proper form of community for human flourishing. Bess writes that the city is "the locus of the best life for human beings, including the life of specific moral and intellectual virtues." And Bess also makes the case that in the United States, especially since the Second World War, we have ignored this community in our design and planning at great peril to ourselves. In short, the way we build our cities and towns is at cross-purposes with our humanity. Bess proposes a better way: a new urbanism that is rooted in the truth of the human person and corresponds to the scale and patterns of the person.

Bess, who identifies himself as a New Urbanist, argues that we need to return to building mixed-use, walkable settlements. The world of suburban sprawl, which is characterized by people living, working, worshiping, shopping, and socializing, each in a different place, is unsustainable and, moreover, undermines the pursuit of the good. Even more significantly, Bess' book attempts to bridge a gap between the secular world and religious world. Bess is both a practicing Catholic and a successful, practicing architect. Thus, Bess is positioned well to offer a unique view on our predicament. Indeed, Bess has firm, but much needed, words for both the architecture world that is so suspicious of claims about the good (especially from religious believers) and the world of religion that too often demonstrates an "unreflective enthusiasm for suburbia and no understanding whatsoever of the virtues of the city."

The background of Bess' book is formed by a profound awareness of the incarnational nature of Christianity and its implications for design. The body matters. Place and space matter. Bess takes a decided stand against the functional dualism of modernist architects and contemporary Christianity. Bess writes that while "good design cannot 'cause' happiness . . .

good design can be an occasion for and manifestation of happiness" and that "good design can both foster and be an expression of community" (emphasis added). Therefore, how we interact with our physical and built environments matters much. Bess' essays are a wake-up call to Christians who can tend to reduce Christianity down to what then-Cardinal Ratzinger called "a packet of dogmas, a moralism." Christianity is, instead, a way of life that has something to say about everything: how we have sex, how our food is grown, and how we build our homes, offices, churches, cafes, cities.

All of this leads Bess to what he describes as a "genuinely modest proposal," but which is one of his more powerful ideas, namely, that New Urbanists and religious leaders work together to help create and develop humane towns and cities. Bess notes that "religious communities have been, and could be again, instrumental in the creation of towns and cities." Thus, Bess argues that "Christian communities today should consider taking a development role analogous to the London aristocrat[s]" of the 16th–18th centuries who "would contract with a developer to build . . . a square surrounded by housing." He then asks a series of questions that every American Catholic bishop would do well to consider:

Instead of building a church and a parking lot on our typical six to fifteen suburban acres, why could we not make a church building, a public (not private) square, perhaps a school, and the beginning of a mixed-use neighborhood? Why couldn't a church partner with a developer and use some of the proceeds from the development of its property to pay for part of the construction of its church building(s)? Why couldn't churches use this strategy to begin to integrate housing and commercial buildings into suburbia as part of mixed-use neighborhoods?

Bess is proposing the Church anew as the driving force of genuine culture, architecture, and community. It is an idea, which to quote Chesterton, has "not has not been tried and found wanting" but "been found difficult and not tried." For those of us who have lived in the stultifying suburbs of America, it is plea we can only hope our bishops hear and act upon.

None of this is to suggest that Bess is proposing a one-size fits all answer. While Bess is clearly arguing that "the architecture of the third millennium" should "serve the primary symbolic purpose it served in earlier eras—the representation, in orderly, durable, functional, and beautiful buildings, of institutions that enable and encourage us to live as civilized human beings," this certainly "does not preclude innovation in architecture." It does, however, require that the architecture of today flow organically from the architecture of the past. Architecture should also fulfill certain criteria including that it be an architecture of "physical and symbolic substance," that it be beautiful, durable, and made with skill. Here is where Bess' words are directed at the functionalist architects of our age who seem to build neither for heaven nor for earth but for convenience and ease.

None of this does justice to the panorama over which Bess guides his readers. These essays need to be read and contemplated. In reading and contemplating them, one is left with certain questions at which one hopes Bess' next book, and the responses of his interlocutors, will be directed. First, what is the relation between Bess' New Urbanism and Wendell Berry's powerful words about farming, the land, and rural communities? Are they complimentary, or mutually exclusive proposals?

Second, Bess rightly laments the sprawl of suburbia. Sprawl seems to be a largely American (and perhaps Canadian) phenomenon. If that is so, what does this say about the logic at the core of Americanism that tends toward this sort of built environment? I would love to see Bess engage, from the perspective of an architect, the powerful critiques of American liberalism put

forward by thinkers such as David Schindler, Patrick Deneen, Jeremy Beer, and others.

Finally, Bess makes use of natural law arguments in these pages. I wonder if a more explicitly theological turn is needed to make his arguments more compelling. At one point, Bess writes, "that an incorrect understanding of the human nature has detrimental consequences for the making of our cities. If we misunderstand human nature, we will surely not make good cities." Can we understand the human person ultimately without knowing the person's origin in God and destiny in Christ? We know that we cannot. What does this then mean for New Urbanism? I am not sure, but I am excited to see how Bess and his fellow Catholic architects answer that question in the years to come.

