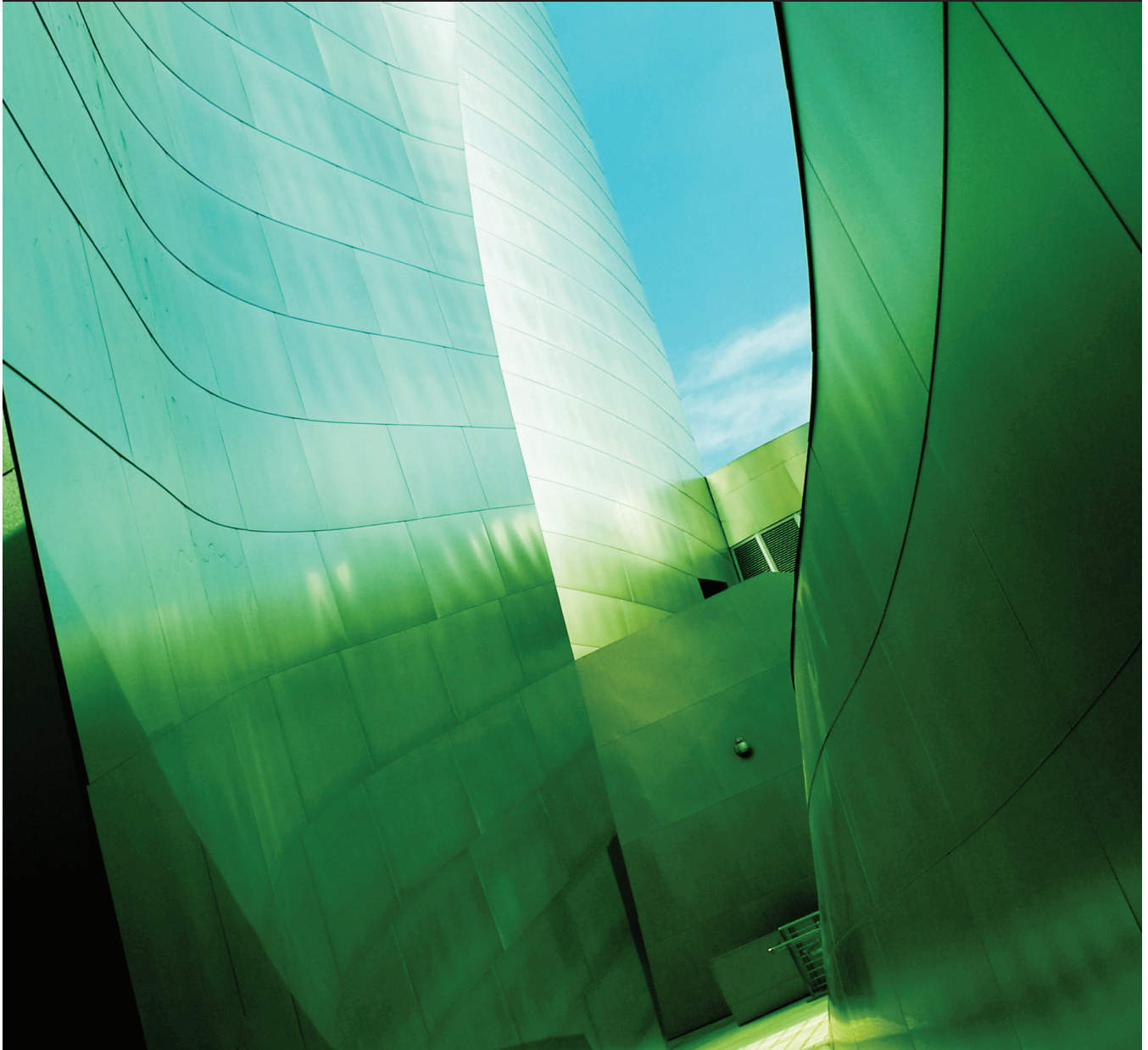


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SAVING SUBURBIA: FROM THE GARDEN TO THE CITY

by MEL MCGOWAN

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I once lived the “American Dream.”

I had a single-family detached house on a half-acre parcel with a three-car garage in a bedroom suburb of Southern California. In order to afford my piece of the “American Pie,” I commuted to work at least an hour each way, barely making it home in time to tuck in my youngest child each night, and rarely in time to have dinner with the whole family. I spoke to my next-door neighbor about three times in three years. The elementary school that was located behind our tract was shut down so my son had to be driven or bussed several miles to the next school. Although I attended the same church where I became a Christian, it had long since given up its Main Street address to relocate to forty acres of agricultural land on the periphery of the city. As a result, it had achieved mega-church status, with over 5,000 weekend attendees. I felt my wife’s pain as she attended week after week enjoying relevant teaching and worship, but not one real conversation, much less the start of any new friendships. It may sound like a “glass half-empty” description, but, in fact, having grown up in Europe and Asia in urban flats, apartments, and townhomes, I felt blessed to have a home like this for my family. However, something was missing from my American Dream.

I have come to understand that something to be a God-wired hunger for community.

THE KIDNAPPING OF COMMUNITY

God is a God of community. Before the beginning, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit “did life together” in community. “In the beginning,” God created a perfect setting for community—Eden—for vertical connection with him, as well as horizontal connection with others. After the cleansing of the flood, God chose a particular people—a community—to tell his story and reveal his ways. And for the past two thousand years, the Bible says that his presence has not been contained by a tent or a building but is somehow found within in Christ-centered community: the church. Humans, made in God’s image and for his purposes, are hard-wired for community.

However, today, the concept of community is being kidnapped from us. To be sure, the word itself is still used at great lengths. We have special interest communities (e.g., the gay community, the evangelical community, etc.). Single-family detached tract residential builders have renamed themselves “Community Builders” and their single use tracts with the minimum required landscaped setbacks are “Master Planned

Communities.” And the leading Real Estate Development trade and research association, Urban Land Institute (ULI), defines “Community Centers” as a shopping center anchored by a discount or department store with a typical GLA (gross leasable area) of 150,000 to 300,000 square feet . . . a.k.a. a “strip center” or “big box center.” But amid so much talk of community, we have lost its true meaning.

The three-car “garagescapes” that have replaced the tree-lined front porch streetscapes of small town America create anonymity and social isolation. Anonymity is also a common critique of the Sunday morning experience in the darkened rows of contemporary mega-churches (many of which actually use the word community in their name). Ironically, in order to achieve mega-church status, many of these “faith communities” are essentially once a week gatherings of dispersed families from the same 20-minute drive radius as a big box retail center. Given the placeless homogeneity of much suburban sprawl (the same big box retailers, tract home builders, gas stations, and “vanilla” office parks), the word seems to be invoked specifically to compensate for the lack of authentic community.

Perhaps the biggest threat to the classic definition of community is technology. The internal combustion engine killed Main Street, Elm Street, and the walkable scale of human settlements and towns. Whereas the “public square,” with its sacred and civic spaces (from the Greek agora, Roman forum, and Italian piazza to the New England village green) was the first and central defining anchor to any community, for the last sixty years the creation of such public spaces is actually prohibited by modern single-use zoning practices. The latest technological shift that is radically transforming the definition of community is online social media, which seems to remove the need for actual physical spaces to connect with others. Are the “real” places becoming obsolete?

All of these changes are demonstrating that when we divorce the word *community* from the reality of a particular human-scaled *place*, we fundamentally lose something in the mix. Today, many church planters and next generation Christian leaders feel a calling to be “architects of community” in either urban or suburban settings. However, most are ill equipped to answer this call because they lack a biblical understanding of *place* and a historical understanding of terms like *city* and *suburb*. Without an adequate theology of place, we resort to either devaluing it (throwaway church buildings) or overdoing it (by trying to re-build the temple). And without a greater understanding of how physical human ecologies and environments either facilitate or constrain community, we will fail to be truly present in the places and cities to which God has called us. In light of this, we’ll consider a theology of place first, then explore the tangible challenges we face for creating authentic community in our cities, with a special focus on the suburbs.

A THEOLOGY OF PLACE

Some consider a theology of place to be primarily concerned with religious buildings; they focus on how to create sacred worship space. Church and religious architects would even argue that there are “timeless principles of liturgical design.” I call this the standard bag of tricks. These induce the user through a series of perceptual and physiological manipulations in order to artificially induce a sense of sacred. They include using stairs and ramp for ascension, forcing the “pilgrim” to lower their head through lowered openings or ceiling elements, and then using filtered natural light to “draw the eye heavenward.”

In contrast, I have come to believe that the most beautiful (not to mention opulent) cathedral can be the site of the most profane acts (e.g., child molestation), and that the smelliest back alley can be the site of the most powerful redeeming act (serving a homeless teen as if she were Jesus). A theology of place needs to be bigger than even the biggest and grandest of church buildings.

The Bible is concerned with place. Indeed, the entire biblical story can be seen as a metanarrative of the journey of God’s people from one place to another, from the Garden to the City. This first place we encounter comes at the culmination of the creation story. It’s a very good place.

Some of our imagery of the Garden of Eden is fuzzy, ranging from an assumption of an abstract metaphor to a literal image of an unending, unspoiled jungle. The actual word Paradise entered European languages from the Persian root word *pardis*, which referred to a beautifully-tended garden enclosed between walls. The Hebrew word *pardes* (probably derived from Persian and used in the Jewish Talmud to refer to Eden) could be interpreted as a park, a garden, or an orchard.

This may sound a bit off, but I find it helpful to relate the Garden of Eden to a theme park. Although an angel with a flaming sword is more impressive than a typical minimum wage theme park security guard, the idea of a carefully designed environment in which every detail (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch) is carefully considered and designed for the enjoyment of its denizens is a powerful one. In fact, it is so compelling that Disney’s walled gardens are the top tourism destinations in America, Europe, and Asia. After spending nearly a decade of my life with the Walt Disney Company, I have come to appreciate the intensity and intentionality of the multi-disciplinary design effort that goes into the creation of a theme park.

However, in his book *Culture-Making*, Andy Crouch points out important differences between the Garden of Eden and the theme park.¹ He highlights that we are made in the image of God to be creative cultivators of God’s creation. A theme park, with its highly scripted and choreographed experiences and environments, leaves little space for

such image bearing. Rather than fulfilling our calling to be creators and cultivators, we are left with few choices other than consuming or perhaps critiquing. In contrast, God placed people in the garden of his design, commanding them to care for it, to manage, to use it, to creatively order it, and to develop it.

*Nowhere in Genesis
does it say that the Garden of
Eden was perfect.*

In light of this mandate, the Garden of Eden was a sheltered place, but it was not a perfect place. In fact, nowhere in Genesis does it say that the Garden of Eden was perfect.² “Perfection” generally implies “static,” “fixed,” or “unchanging.” But in the Garden, God does something that Disney would never even think about. He leaves the people to their own devices: to use their gift of free will to do something in harmony with God’s will, or to use it for their own purposes or glory—to rape, distort, abuse, and exploit it. When the wrong choice is made, creation fractures, splinters, and groans.

This story leaves us with a question and a choice of our own. Did God give up on his creation after Adam and Eve chose selfishly? The sloppy answer has been yes, that while God wants to save people from their sin, the world is “heading to hell in a handbasket.” It’s the notion that God has thrown in the towel on the creation that he called “good” and that “it’s all gonna burn someday.” Consequently, physical places here on earth are relatively insignificant, eternally speaking.

Yet, the Jewish worldview of Jesus was that not only has God not given up on creation, but that he was also actively at work within it, moving towards a rebirth, a regeneration, a renewal. Randy Alcorn—perhaps the leading theologian of heaven—articulates the biblical perspective that God will “restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets” (Acts 3:21 TNIV). He asserts, “The earth’s death will be no more final than our own. The destruction of the old Earth in God’s purifying judgment will immediately be followed by its resurrection to new life.”³ The Bible says that God’s judgment will destroy our works of “wood, hay or straw,” yet it will purify those of “gold, silver, and costly stones” (1 Cor 3:12-15 TNIV). Moreover, the apostle John notes that when Christians die, what they have done on earth for Christ “will follow them” (Rev 14:13 TNIV). This is why theologian Albert Wolters concludes that “those purified works on the earth must surely include the products of human culture. There is no reason to doubt that they will be transfigured and transformed by their liberation from the curse, but they will be in essential continuity with our experience now—just as our resurrected bodies, though glorified, will still be bodies.”⁴

The choice then is what to do with God’s creation. Like Adam and all who have followed him, we have a choice between prayerful stewardship to his glory or selfish manipulation of creation to our demise.

“From the Garden to the City” could be the name of a film adaptation of the Bible; it could also refer to the first eleven chapters of Genesis, where cities become the culmination of human cultivation. Unfortunately, the stain of sin and corruption that produce the earliest cities remains indelibly etched into our perception of the city today. After Cain kills his brother Abel, he is separated from a communal relationship with God, his family, and the land. Not satisfied with God’s provision of a mark of protection that will ward off those who would harm him, Cain defiantly relies on his own provision. He builds a city which functions as a surrogate form of protection and provision, similar to the way that people run away from their families and their God to the anonymity of the city today.

Genesis 1 begins with the ordering and shaping of nature, but by Genesis 11, nature is supplanted in the city of Babel. Like Cain, the residents of Babel sought to “make a name” for themselves, to control their own identity and security, and to build a “stairway to heaven” (the ziggurat form that the tower may have taken) on their own strength and to their own glory. In this city, the cultural project is the supplanting of all traces of dependence on God. What they chose to make of the world (culture) deepened their alienation and independence from their Maker. As Andy Crouch notes, “For all its moments of beauty and ingenuity, culture can easily be Babel: a fist-shaking attempt to take over God’s role for ourselves.”⁵

God has chosen the dense, diverse, and walkable streets of the city as a focus of redemption.

So from early in history and our reading of the Bible, the city is cast as a receptacle for sin, a “den of iniquity.” However, God seems to be calling urban prophets in the tradition of Nehemiah to return, revisit, and restore the city to its rightful place as the culmination of his larger story arc. Author Eric Jacobsen even suggests that God has chosen the dense, diverse, and walkable streets of the city as a focus of redemption.⁶ Just as Joseph told the brothers who had sold him into slavery “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good” (Gen 50:20 TNIV), God seems to be saying of our cities: “Though you meant them to be a form of escape from me, I will use them to draw you back to me.” Jacobsen highlights this redemption theme throughout the cities of the Bible: Cain’s desire to flee to the city after killing his brother finds a redeemed expression in the cities of refuge set apart in the Law of Moses; the fear of alienation and scattering of the citizens of Babel is redeemed when the Israelites find cities in the Promised Land in which they can gather; the desire to make a name for themselves in Babel is redeemed in the city of Jerusalem, where God causes his name to dwell. God’s power to redeem is stronger than our ability to alienate and break down.

Throughout the Bible then, it becomes clear that place is important to God—whether it be wilderness or city. Although the specific geography of Israel’s homeland changed (from Canaan, to Egypt, to the Wilderness, to the Promised Land, to exile, then back), his chosen people were a

“place-based” community. In fact, God got pretty prescriptive with the Israelites in how he wanted everything laid out from the macro-scale of the community site plan to the micro-scale of the “smells and bells.” But the end of the story culminates with the creation of another glorious place.

Just like with the Garden of Eden, God is the “architect and builder” (Heb 11:10) of another masterfully designed environment, “the holy city, the new Jerusalem” (Rev 21:2). Although he is the Supreme Designer of the city, God allows people to participate in the finishing of this project. This heaven (as we often call it) will be a physical place on *earth* where God’s instruction to the first human beings is ultimately fulfilled. Besides God’s own handiwork, artifacts, and people, “the glory and the honor of the nations” are brought into the city by “the kings of the earth.” (Rev 21:24-26). In this final vision of the city, it is filled with redeemed human culture. The question of what cultural artifacts will make it into the New Jerusalem is a fascinating one. Andy Crouch doesn’t bet on “cultural mediocrity, the half-baked and half-hearted efforts to make something of the world.” He does bet on certain works of Bach, Miles Davis, green tea crème brulee, fish tacos, *Moby Dick*, the *Odyssey*, and the iPod, while recognizing that they would be suitably purified and redeemed, like our resurrected bodies.⁷

C.S. Lewis imaginatively conveyed the continuity of the Old and New Earth in this passage from *The Last Battle*:

The difference between the old Narnia and the new Narnia was . . . The new one was a deeper country: every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more. . .

‘The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this’ . . .

‘Why!’ exclaimed Peter. ‘It’s England. And that’s the house itself—Professor Kirk’s old home in the country where all our adventures began!’

‘I thought that house had been destroyed,’ said Edmund.

‘So it was,’ said the Faun. ‘But you are now looking at the England within England, the real England just as this is the real Narnia. And in that inner England no good thing is destroyed.’⁸

As an architectural/urban designer, I am a card-carrying member of the Supreme Architect’s fan club. The common thread in design that stands the test of time—that takes into consideration this theology of place in both the Garden and the City—is not traditionalism, functionalism, minimalism, or the avant garde. It is working with, not

The common thread in design that stands the test of time is working with, not against God's architecture.

against God's architecture, whether it is the natural topography, native ecology, prevailing wind patterns, or solar orientation. We should draw inspiration from, rather than ignore or compete with, his creation. This is true whether the designer acknowledges the authorship of a Creator or not. It is the thread that holds together the local vernacular architecture that inspires a luxury resort in Bali, Mont St Michel, a National Park lodge, the Arts & Crafts movement, Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, Frank Gehry's organic structural sculptures, and George Lucas' depiction of the capital of "Naboo." Personally, I wouldn't be surprised to find not only works of fine architecture, but also my grandparent's mountain cabin on the other side of eternity.

This realization has changed everything in my approach to community design and architecture. The idea that a site plan could be prayerfully considered, rather than seen as a simple technical solution or a functional diagram has revolutionized my design philosophy. But what about the average Christian? What does a theology of place have to do with our everyday lives? *Everything.*

The God of Place did not teach that true spirituality is about eventually escaping this world to some other place in the sky where we will live forever. A Christian should anticipate spending forever here, in a new City of Heaven that comes to a renewed Earth. Rob Bell puts it this way:

Jesus wants his followers to bring heaven, not hell, to earth. This has been God's intention for people since the beginning. . . The entire movement of the Bible is of a God who wants to be here, with his people. The church is described later as being the temple of God. And how does the Bible end? With God 'coming down' and taking up residence here on earth. The goal isn't escaping the world but making this world the kind of place God can come to. And God is remaking us into the kind of people who can do this kind of work.⁹

If we take this seriously, does it change the houses that we buy, the neighborhoods we live in, the places we shop, and the products that we consume? Definitely. Perhaps most challenged is our pursuit of the American Dream. Let's take a closer look.

AUTOPIA

One of the top current television shows is the phenomenon known as *American Idol*. As people across the country, including many Christians, root for their favorite Idol, two ironies strike me. The obvious irony is the full embrace, even worship, of the show, its participants, and its brand by those who profess a Judeo-Christian faith, in the face of the Second Commandment. The other, more subtle, irony is the

obliviousness of our worship of the true American Idol—the suburban American Dream—and the damage it has caused to our lives and the sacredness of place.

A brief survey of history reveals that human ecologies and communities have certain consistencies and patterns that have repeated themselves across space and time. Up until the twentieth century, people throughout history lived in human-scaled environments, defined largely by the radius and distance that a person could walk. Building heights were also limited by the number of stairs a person could comfortably climb. A diversity of uses made it possible to live, work, learn, and play within a reasonable distance of each other, if not on top of each other. Finally, various densities of homes allowed multiple generations of families to live in the same community, if they so chose. Then something fundamentally changed.

A new technology called the internal combustion engine radically transformed the scale of living. For thousands of years, a twenty-minute commute meant a one-mile radius for most, which was the characteristic size of some of the largest cities. The car created a new regional scale in which people could live, work, and play twenty miles or more from each destination. At the same time and partly as a result, Modernism took root in both architecture and community planning, united by the dictum that “form follows function.” Many of the first generation European Modern architects took this as an opportunity to rid architecture of its potential to communicate the values, culture, and faith of a community. Since many felt that religion was an “opium of the masses,” they stripped buildings of the gargoyles, buttresses, and iconography. The reason that this movement flourished had less to do with the public adoptions of this anti-theology and more to do with the fact that it took much less skill, cost, and time to produce “functional boxes.” The real damage was done by Modernist planners whose functionalist approach led to zoning, in which a community is broken up into specific functional zones: residential (of various densities), retail, office park, industrial, etc. The combination of the automobile and new Modernism was a death knell to human-scaled community.

This combination, however, proved a potent facilitator of a new American Dream. For the first time in human history, the “city” (regardless of scale) was no longer viewed as the proper and safe container of community. “Downtown” became synonymous with the “Central Business District” (CBD) as a result of single use functional zoning. Urban design evolved with the City Beautiful movement and almost a sole focus on creating grand civic and governmental centers. Once these areas were stripped of homes, schools, and churches, retail departed as well.

Partially in response to the de-humanization of the Industrial Revolution, environmental designers including Andrew Jackson

Downing, Frederick Law Olmstead, Ebenezer Howard, and Frank Lloyd Wright began articulating a competing, yet complementary vision to the high-rise urban vision of European architectural modernists. What they effectively argued was that we should “return” to the garden, and create a new suburban landscape. The original “garden city” models of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were promising. They were intricately planned around natural features and emulated the scale and organic feel of a medieval village, with a rich variety of housing types and uses. Many of these communities (e.g., Mariemont, OH; Riverside, IL; Forest Hills Gardens, NY; Country Club District, MO; Beverly Hills, CA) remain some of the most prized communities in the nation. And many were based on a walkable radius to a rail transit station.

Following World War II, the American Dream machine kicked into full gear. Seemingly unrelated Federal government initiatives changed the face of the nation. President Eisenhower, impressed with the German Autobahn system, pushed forward the Federal Aid Highway Act in 1956. Appropriating \$25 billion for the construction of 41,000 miles of the Interstate system over a 20-year period, it was the largest public works project in American history to that point. Although done in the name of military defense (the technical name was the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act), the most direct result of the act was the government’s subsidization of suburban sprawl, making commutes between urban centers to suburbs much quicker and furthering the flight of citizens and businesses and divestment from inner cities. A secondary result was the tearing up of any alternative urban transportation systems (e.g., the elimination of Los Angeles’ extensive interurban railway system as funded by auto-related industries).

On the housing front, the government heavily incentivized the home ownership of suburban detached homes through the widespread availability of mortgages (through the Veterans Administration and the Federal Housing Administration) as well as mortgage interest deduction. Somehow in the process we went from being able to build our own custom or Sears catalog “kit” home and have it paid off in 3-5 years, to the situation we find ourselves in today, in which 30-years of interest payments are the norm and millions of homes are in or face foreclosure. These trends along with lax underwriting standards have encouraged the median home size in America to become 2400 square feet, compared to 800 square feet in the UK and the European Union.

One fundamental departure from historical urbanity within the “anti-urban” suburban model is the attempt to freeze time. Historically, any human settlement has been allowed to grow organically and mature in response to changing demographic, environmental, and economic demands. As the American “Leave it to Beaver” home was elevated to the status of an unquestioned dream, housing subdivisions created more elaborate Covenant, Codes, & Restrictions and Homeowner’s

Association design guidelines to ensure that the status quo would remain forever. Ironically however, the other supportive land uses that followed the government subsidies and new freeways (strip malls, office/industrial parks, and even institutions) seemed to adopt and embrace a transient or temporal model: “throwaway” architecture in the name of minimalism, functionalism, or more honestly, cheapness. Pre-engineered metal industrial buildings, stick-built stucco prototype retail stores, and warehouse churches are standard in suburbia. Again, these are not simply aesthetic decisions. Financing models embraced by commercial lenders encourage lower construction costs, while governmental tax policies encourage faster depreciation of physical assets.

Cracks in this version of the American Dream are getting harder to hide.

This is the reality of Autopia. And if you haven’t noticed, cracks in this version of the American Dream are getting harder to hide. People are tired of spending a quarter tank of gasoline to buy a quart of milk. Only ten percent of kids have a school they can walk to. After our long commutes, we pull into our three-car garage and enter the kitchen door without ever talking to our neighbors. We have little genuine community. Yet we think we have the home we want. Indeed, Americans have shown an amazing willingness to continue to extend their commute time in order to qualify for the home that they want. But as negative equity situations and foreclosures rise, some have questioned the viability of this version of the American Dream.

For starters, Autopia no longer fits our context. The American Dream machine has been focused on one demographic: married with children. With the aging of Baby Boomers, later marriages, and fewer children, less than a third of new US households formed are forecasted to fit this demographic! Many suburban church plants and mega-churches have almost exclusively focused on this demographic. One forecast states that the current glut of single family detached homes will not meet their anticipated demand until 2030. Gen “Next”, empty nesters, young urban professionals, and DINKs (Double-Income No Kids) are increasingly showing a preference for diversity over monotony in choosing more “urbane” live/work/play settings. Studies consistently show a willingness to pay a premium for smaller lots or properties if they are located within access to transit and/or have features of a “New Urbanist” community.

Second, Autopia no longer works. Various proclamations, from President Obama to the Urban Land Institute, have stated that the era of building sprawl is over. The biggest reasons have less to do with “consumer preference” or lifestyle choice, but with economics and the environment. Even young couples with children prefer foreclosure-resistant neighborhoods where transportation costs are low (about 9% of household expenditures) rather than foreclosure-risky neighborhoods

in the outer suburbs where transportation costs are high (25% or more of household expenditures). According to a 2000 Impact Analysis for the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority, a suburban resident of Atlanta is likely to drive an average of eight times more miles than an urban resident. Low-density suburban development results in the highest per capita demands on natural systems and habitats, including impervious land cover, miles driven, water use, energy use, air pollution, and greenhouse gas production. Issues of energy availability (the near-term global prospect of peaking oil supply no longer being able to keep up with global demand) and the changing regulatory context of climate change (whether you believe in it or not) is making the cost of getting access to raw land and serving greenfield development higher and higher.

CREATING SACRED SPACE IN SUBURBIA

One trend I have noticed is a tendency towards false dichotomies.

In my work, I have a lot of conversations about the future of the church with many established and emerging Christian leaders and pastors. One trend I have noticed is a tendency towards false dichotomies. Suburban is out, urban is in. The mega-church campus is out, while the multi-site alternative and church plants are in. I find some of these generalizations a bit troubling. As architects of the next generation of Christian community, I believe that pastors and church planters need to have a richer understanding of the emerging postmodern landscape. For the first time in human history, the UN estimates that half of the world's 6.7 billion people are living in urban areas. This does not mean that half of humanity is crammed in high-rise towers in a Central Business District. In fact "Downtown" residents of major metro areas only represent around 2% of total households. More accurate definitions of "urban" and official jurisdictional boundaries of "cities" (as opposed to the classic definition as a walkable, dense, diverse settlement) fully incorporate the suburban periphery into their scope. For example, most of the Northeastern corridor of the US incorporating Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington, DC is considered urbanized according to the UN statistic.

So suburbia is part of the city.

Can it be retrofitted to meet the needs of emerging demographics and the God-wired hunger for community? Can a theology of place exist in Autopia? A movement of planners, government leaders, and architects called the Congress for New Urbanism has demonstrated over the past few decades how "urbanity" can be inserted not only back into major urban cores, but also in suburban city and town centers by taming the car. Rather than building with the assumption that everyone will arrive by car and park separately for each use, we have learned how to "stash" parking in the rear of buildings, on-streets, and in garages. Rather than separating the different land uses miles from each other (as modernist

zoning did), we have learned (or re-learned) how to stack multi-family or office space above retail to create active streetscapes that frame outdoor rooms. Former greyfield (parking lots), brownfield (industrial sites) and obsolete retail malls are being redeveloped as vibrant centers within the generic field of suburban sprawl. Unfortunately, what hasn't been widely understood is how to integrate sacred space and Christian community into the mix.

Every believer can start by following Christ's command to "love your neighbor" and taking the "neighbor" thing a little more seriously.

Just as God called Nehemiah back to restore the city of God, I believe that God is calling Christians today to redeem and restore sustainable Christ-centered community back to the heart of our communities, even where endless agglomerations of suburban subdivisions have never previously had a heart. Every believer can start by following Christ's command to "love your neighbor" and taking the "neighbor" thing a little more seriously. Don't settle for a placeless metaphor instead of real community. A neighborhood barbeque is a start. Too many Christians have grown so accustomed to their fellowship with the "equally yoked" that the thought of a neighbor showing up with a cooler of beer sends shivers up their spine. Love someone enough that you still want to be a part of their life if they never go to church!

Choosing your neighborhood is choosing a mission field; prayerfully consider God's leading in the same way that a missionary would. This singular decision is also the one that will have the greatest impact on our creation care footprint. The choice of where we live in relation to daily life needs: work, school, the grocery store, etc. is the single biggest variable with influence on the economic and environmental sustainability of our communities. One simple benchmark is Walkability.¹⁰ The energy savings and carbon footprint of intelligently sited and integrated neighborhoods that are walkable has been well documented.

Churches can consider their place in the city by defining their community beyond their property lines. In many cases, rather than being an "anchor," an "asset," or a "heart" of the neighborhood (as it used to be), churches are perceived as a NIMBY (Not-In-My-Backyard) undesirable use because of the property and sales tax drain and off-site parking and traffic concerns. For the past half-decade I have been engaged in various experiments in integrating faith communities back into the fabric of community cores and what I call Postmodern Agoras. Here are some various strategies for churches to consider:

1. Develop surplus acreage of surface parking lots into mixed-use community buildings that create a "drawbridge" to the community.
2. Recast churches as performing arts or community centers that are more readily recognized as "anchors" for retail or town center development.

3. Pursue joint-development strategies with mixed-use/new town developers which reserve ministry building pads, while minimizing the amount of dedicated Sunday morning parking required (e.g., sharing office/retail parking spaces).

4. Redevelop obsolete retail/big-box anchors and centers as “Main Streets” or church-anchored “piazzas.”

The challenge can sometimes seem daunting: to create sacred space in the heart(s) of the city, even in the heart of Autopia; to bring a bit of the kingdom of heaven to earth; to build something that just might last the trial by fire.

May you follow the God of Nehemiah on the journey to real community.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever lived in a suburban context? If so, were the defining characteristics similar to what the author described?
2. When choosing where to live, have you ever considered the issue through the lens of a “theology of place”? Why or why not?
3. How does the physical location of where we live, shop, work, or go to school apply to our faith and mission as God’s people?
4. How does the place you live—whether in the suburbs or not—make developing genuine community difficult? What could you do to overcome those barriers?
5. Do you believe your church has a theology of place? If so, how? If not, how might you be a catalyst toward that end?
6. In what ways could your local church serve as a “heart” of community for its physical neighbors?

END NOTES

1. Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 112.
2. Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 158.
3. Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004), 357.
4. Albert Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 41.
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6. Eric O. Jacobsen, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003), 44.
7. Crouch, *Culture Making*, 170.
8. C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: Collier Books, 1956), 171-181.
9. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 149-150.
10. See the “Walk Score” of any property at <http://www.walkscore.com>.

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