

# Civic Art, Civic Life and Urbanism

**Carroll William Westfall**

Let me lay out some premises of what follows. These premises can be known, but they cannot be proven. They reside in the realm of articles of faith, of propositions that are self-evident to the wise, and in the domain of truth. They belong in nature, and knowing them helps define human nature.

One such point is this: The mature, sane person understands that the most urgent task he faces is the one posited in the New Testament and posed by the Delphic oracle: Know thyself.

Another is this: There have been wise people before us who have something useful to teach us.

There is a third one: To know oneself, to draw on what others have to teach, requires participation a community, or more precisely, in three communities. One is composed of those who have preceded us and with whom we have an affiliation. Another is made up of our contemporaries. And a third is formed from those yet to come whose lives we will have improved through our actions.

And finally there is this: Not all things are of equal value. Things that promote knowledge of oneself, things whose value has allowed them to survive across time, and things that bind us across time and into communities are to be valued above all other things.

The avatars of this position are now called modernists. They claim that any individual is at least as wise as those proceeding him, that

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*Carroll William Westfall is Frank Montana Professor and Chairman of the School of Architecture-University of Notre Dame*



knowing oneself is best manifested by responding to impulses, urges, and intuitions untouched by ratiocination and unchecked by tradition, and that the individual is self-sufficient and others are there only to serve his ends.

Finally, they suggest that nothing is necessarily more important than something else, that logic or reason is an adequate judge of truth, if, that is, there is anything that can be called truth, or indeed if there is anything outside ourselves.

These days, the modernists, who are narcissists, rationalists, relativists, and nihilists, are dominant. And these days we find we are unable to build cities. (I need not demonstrate how things are broken. After all, the premise of this symposium is that our cities are broken and need fixing.) Our inability to build cities demonstrates their dominance. Their dominance is the cause of our inability.

The modernists have broken the city. Only a rejection of modernism can fix it. The premises I placed at the beginning provide the basis for the replacement of modernism by traditionalism.

Traditionalism recognizes that a city is first of all, that is, most importantly, a place where people live in a community. That community knows that only the city can allow people to seek the perfection of their nature. A city is a place that puts truth above mere fact. And it understands that the moment in which we live is connected to all moments in the past and the prelude to what follows.

#### **A Conversation About Architecture**

The city we build is the good city which is the nearest possible embodiment of the best city which

exists only in words. The words sketch out the aspirations that are then embodied in the actions of the citizens. The best city seeks the perfection of all its members; therefore, all must be allowed to participate.

So too in the realm of good architecture and urbanism: The participants in a conversation about architecture must be all those who participate in the conversation about the best city, i.e., about the best possible city here and now. When any of the citizens of the city are excluded from that conversation, the conversation is about buildings and not about architecture.

There is, in other words, a distinction between buildings and architecture that parallels the one separating settlements from cities. A conversation about buildings is a lesser one than that about architecture. It is an incomplete conversation or one that covers only part of the topic. For example, it might be about a tradition in construction addressing contingent circumstances, or about meeting particular, contingent requirements and functions, or about low cost, or about a quite personal opinion about what constitutes beauty. These are important topics of conversation, just as is the one about the market, the port, and the other kinds of lesser settlement. But a conversation that excludes any of the topics that belong in the conversation, and a conversation that excludes, or does not take seriously, the views of all the citizens is not about architecture. It is about the lesser thing, building, from which architecture might arise in the same way that a city might arise from a market, but only if it is acknowledged that the conversation is partial and that it must be pursued if it is to rise higher.

A person does not come to know oneself as a whole being, as body, soul, and intellect, in the market. Similarly, he does not learn the whole of what can be known through building. The fuller knowledge requires the city, and it requires architecture. A conversation about building cannot tap very deeply into the wisdom that has accumulated about how and why we ought to build in one way rather than in another. That narrower conversation necessarily excludes members of the community in which we participate, a community of our contemporaries, of our predecessors, and of those who are yet to come. And that conversation about building takes it as axiomatic that all things are of equal value. A conversation about building, a conversation that stops short of addressing architecture, cannot distinguish between things that are important and those that are trivial. But a conversation about architecture is a conversation that promotes knowledge of oneself. It is about things whose value has allowed them to survive across time. And it is about things that bind us across time and into communities. It is a conversation about something that, in the realm of building, is to be valued above all other things.

When a conversation is about architecture it is about buildings serving the civil life. It is, in other words, a conversation about urbanism. Urbanism is the physical form the political life takes. By politics I do not mean partisanship. By politics I mean the way of life of a people united in a community in which all the members have access to the good and noble life. Putting it another way, architecture is the name given the art of building used to make a physical place where all members of a community may seek justice. This produces the equation that says good architecture is a form of good urbanism which is a form justice takes.

Let me extend the equation. If the civil life is about ethical conduct, or goodness, then architectural form is about aesthetic choice, or beauty. We can complete the trilogy by noting that

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both goodness and beauty are different terms for truth, that is, the enduring order honored in our search for wisdom through knowledge and grace through religion. In this way goodness, truth, and beauty are different aspects of the same thing.

Goodness refers to conduct, truth to knowledge, and beauty to art. When we touch the one, we have the other two within reach.

This is a position of traditionalism, a position that is anathema to modernism. Modernism dismisses the existence of any such thing as goodness, truth, and beauty as knowable, teachable things that can guide one's actions in civil, intellectual, and artistic

activities. Modernists dismiss these qualities, just as they dismiss tradition as a useful guide. But without respect for tradition there is no connection with the community of those who proceeded us and no access to the accumulated knowledge they piled up for us to draw on. They think tradition is a yoke tying us to a useless past. Traditionalists think it is a guide to present action, a guide to be held in pious respect but approached with skepticism about its ability to address current conditions.

### **What Is Great Architecture?**

We will find these points confirmed by examining the buildings that have been and continue to be considered great. Any great building becomes intelligible or reveals itself most completely only when we consider the part it played in an urban setting and serving a political end or purpose.

Standard histories of architecture obscure this point. They usually present the buildings in isolation from their urban setting, treating them as if each is a mere picture in a survey book arranged by style or architect or relative sophistication of the technology or building function, to name several useful and often used schemes for organizing the material. These are useful schemes, but they are not cumulative, and finally they are inadequate.

They are inadequate because they fail to distinguish between building and architecture. They



accept building and architecture as being similar in importance just as they accept a market, a port, a military camp, or a modern commercial center to be a city and not merely a settlement. They are inadequate because they fail to recognize that all great architecture came into existence, or is evoked to serve, a good state.

Let me amend that slightly: All great architecture came into existence, or is evoked to serve, *what the builders, that is, the community, considers to be a good state*. Architecture, in other words, is a statement in the conversation about what the good city ought to be. It comes into existence because someone or some body of people has the power and the authority and the wherewithal to get it built. A good building, then, is a provocative statement. It asserts a position that it makes visible in architectural form, a position that has its counterpart in the position taken by the regime that supports its construction.

We know this from our experience with the past and the present, both in the history of states and the history of architecture: The most provocative statements are made when the state is under assault. In peace and in prosperity, there is nothing much to respond to. But when the authoritative part of the state is under assault, the state must be clear about what it is defending. Thus we can say that buildings are like armies; they are at their best when defending the good state.

Architecture in this light can be understood as the political life carried on in another form. (Please recall that by political life, I mean the way of life of a community united by a common view of the good, one that seeks nobility and justice for all its

members. I do not mean partisan politics.) A review of the past 2,600 years of western architecture would show that we most value the things that have been built to assert a view of the political life or about

the form the regime ought to take. Going farther, it would show that the assertion is not about any view but about a particular view. We value most those states and those buildings that seek a congruence with the order of nature, a congruence that can never be perfect or absolute, but one that is open to constant amendment.

The amendment comes from consulting the lessons of the past and then amending those lessons in light of current knowledge and current circumstances. The process is one that treats the past with piety but accepts what the past teaches with

skepticism. In any living tradition, this dialectic of pious skepticism is always at work, and that is the way traditional architecture is kept new and modern.

### **Traditional, Avant-Garde Architecture Contrasted**

Here is the stark contrast: Over the past 250 years or so, piety has been banished in favor of skepticism, or skepticism has operated without piety. During the entire career of modernism, we have had assertions by an avant-garde that there is an architecture that extends from the individual. It is independent of institutions if not an antidote to them. It has no necessary relationship, or even any relationship at all, to the civil and the urban. And it seeks only its own ends and no larger ends such as the presentation in architectural form of goodness, truth, or beauty.



Meanwhile, the world that revolutionary doctrine sought to overturn and annihilate has survived. It has survived in the natural right doctrines enshrined in the founding documents and subsequent regime of this country. And it has survived in the traditional architecture that is the natural counterpart and complement to that regime.

To abbreviate this point even more: In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, avant-garde architecture has served any ends, all ends, and therefore no ends, while in the United States, traditional architecture has always sought to be a civil architecture serving civil ends.

The most convincing illustration of this point comes from noting the uses made of the best form of traditional architecture, namely, classical architecture. (In saying that the classical is the best form of traditional architecture I am making two statements. One is simply a definition: Classical architecture is that which serves the highest ends. That is the meaning of the term class. The other is evaluative: Classical architecture more fully embodies goodness, truth, and beauty and better serves the civil ends of the regime. It is better able to be an urban architecture, an architecture that serves cities that are not merely markets, ports, military camps, or commercial centers.) In the twentieth century, classical architecture has always been evoked by those with a passionate conviction that theirs was the right architecture to serve their ends, even when they were evil ends. It was the architecture of the United States when our regime was passionately committed to its founding principles. And it was the architecture of Adolph Hitler when he sought to mask the evil of his regime in forms that seduce and betray, as Leon Krier has explained. In neither case would a lesser architecture do.

Both could have made a different choice. After World War I, both Hitler and the United States had available an alternative to traditional architecture in general and to classical architecture in particular. It was the architecture of the avant-garde, the one that arose from the modernist roots going back to the eighteenth century and given a radical form in the period of turmoil after the Great War. It explicitly denied validity to traditional forms. It explicitly glorified impulse and intuition. It explicitly sought originality while shunning familiarity. It explicitly sought to allow the technical to dictate the artistic

rather than have the technical serve the artistic. And it was based on the premise that the civil ought to serve the architectural. Regimes ought to be created that could bring into existence the urban and architectural images of the architects. This is backwards. Recall that the architectural and the civil are different, covalent forms of the same good city of justice and nobility in which we all aspire to live.

This avant-garde modernist architecture was promulgated as an architecture of peace replacing the traditional architecture serving the regimes that had just engaged in the Great War. To that end, it was an architecture devoted to the individual rather than the state, to commerce rather than institutions, to autonomous, free individuals rather than to states that would go to war with one another. But these good intentions were betrayed by their achievements. It is an architecture so flimsy, so insubstantial, so utilitarian and so bereft of aesthetic value, no one would go to war over it.

Indeed, it is now clear that no one except the narrow circle of the avant-garde has any passion for modernist architecture. It is not an architecture serving anything worthy of great passions. And it never has been.

It simply is not the case that impulse and intuition can be the basis for the civil life and a civil architecture. It is simply not the case that originality is to be preferred to familiarity. The technical cannot dictate to the artistic but must instead serve the artistic. And the civil ought not to serve the architectural but be seen for what it is, as another form of the civil and a complement to it in producing the good city of justice and nobility in which we all aspire to live.

It comes down to this: those with the passionate conviction that the city is the best means of perfecting the life of the individual have always used traditional and classical architecture to assist them in their purpose. As it has always been, so must it be now. There is no other architecture worth fighting for, but to get it, and to get our cities back, we must undertake that good fight.

Is this not the time to take up the fight? The best architecture is produced when it is mustered into service by a regime under assault. Our cities are under assault, by the narcissists, rationalists, relativists, and nihilists who now have the upper hand in schools and professions of architecture and

planning and in the civil service and political agencies that control the form given our cities and urban areas. The desecration of the landscape and

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the dilapidation of our cities are the result of the inexorable working of the laws and ordinances controlling our building practices. We have seen what those laws and ordinances produce, and we turn away from it in disgust and horror. We have also seen what tradition can produce, because that is where we go for our vacations and holidays—Charleston, Savannah, Santa Barbara, and so on. These are American cities, embodying the principles upon which our nation was founded. They too were built according to laws and ordinances—different

ones from the ones we now have, many of them implicit understandings of how the civic life ought to be conducted within a community. These cities are worth fighting to protect, just as it is worth fighting for the opportunity to build them again elsewhere in the new contingent circumstances of the present. In our regime, we wage war with law, so we need to change the laws and ordinances so that we can build what we can love instead of continuing to build that which we despise.

Traditionalism holds the past in pious regard even as it assaults it with skepticism about its potential to assist us in the present. We need to look more closely and more piously at the surroundings, both new and old, that we love. And we need to regain the practice of pious skepticism that allows us to extract from them the lessons that can guide us in our present practices. In that way, we will be putting into practice our knowledge that the city is the greatest work of man while the greatest work of the city is the perfection of the nature of man. **CP**