A Plea for Beauty: 
A Manifesto for a New Urbanism

By Roger Scruton

Our culture is a culture of cities, and without cities we could not conceivably have enjoyed the enormous scientific, economic, and political advances of the Enlightenment. Cities are also the heart of the modern nation state, and every country that modernizes does so by mass migration from country to city. 

No environmental problem is more important, therefore, than that posed by the degradation of our cities, and we must reflect on the factors that might prevent or reverse the decay that we are witnessing. To fight the blight, some policymakers have embraced urban planning. Although some successful examples of planned cities exist, such planning has often failed to produce city centers where people want to live or spend leisure time. To plan or not to plan is a false choice. Instead, civic leaders should think in terms of fostering beauty through the use of aesthetic constraints. These constraints may help reduce sprawl and make American city centers attractive homes—in the vein of great European cities such as Paris and Florence—rather than deserted eyesores.

In a free market, prices are reliable signals of the scarcity of products, goods flow from those who do not want them to those who do, and order arises by an “invisible hand” from the free dealings of the many participants. That these facts are all common knowledge does not detract from their truth. Not surprisingly, conservatives tend to look to markets as proof that effective social order can exist without the state and that freedom and order are not opposites but two sides of the same coin.

When it comes to the difficult problems faced by our ever-growing societies, conservatives tend to favor market solutions. This is especially true of conservatives in America, who have inherited the American spirit of enterprise and self-reliance and refuse to be dictated to by people who have not proved their right to take charge. Confronted by problems like environmental degradation, educational decline, health care inefficiencies, or crime, American conservatives' first response is to look to the free actions of individuals rather than to the state for a solution.

In one area in particular, neither market solutions nor bureaucratic controls have worked in a way that the ordinary citizen would wish: city planning and the built environment. Markets depend on cities, which are the principal places
where people come together to exchange goods and services, as well as knowledge, aspirations, and ideals. “Civilisation as we know it is inseparable from urban life,” wrote Friedrich Hayek in The Constitution of Liberty. However, our cities are in decline, becoming places where people will work or conduct business, but not live or play.

**Planning: Solution or Problem?**

The first response of many Americans is that central planning is not the solution but part of the problem. The housing projects of the 1950s and ’60s, in which attractive and settled neighborhoods were bulldozed and replaced by municipal housing that nobody wanted to live in, were the result of planning, as were the thruways and expressways that deprived city centers of their dignity and allure. Those projects had disastrous social consequences: a demoralized workforce frozen in places where jobs were no longer available, unvisited city centers, crime-ridden neighborhoods, and vandalizing of public space. But the principal lesson was not learned: that plans have unintended consequences that accumulate over a far longer period, ultimately outweighing the short-term benefits.

In her celebrated book The Death and Life of Great American Cities, which first appeared in 1961, Jane Jacobs argued that zoning, the concept on which the entire American planning system is based, is misconceived. Zoning leads to a disaggregation of the many functions of the city so that people live in one part, work in another, spend leisure time in a third, and shop in a fourth. Whole swaths of the city are thereby deserted for large parts of the day, and the fruitful interaction of work and leisure never occurs.

Zoning contributes to the dereliction of the city when its local industries die and ensures that the central areas are not places of renewal, but at best museums and at worst vandalized spaces no one can use. In successful cities like Paris, New York, and Rome, workshops, offices, schools, churches, and theaters all stand side by side, with houses borrowing walls from whatever building has a boundary to spare.

The complaint against zoning is surely right. But it is not a complaint against planning. The great planning disasters, some of which have been studied by Peter Hall, owe their negative impact at least in part to their scale. When the layout of a town is conceived from a master plan, the possibilities for disaster are legion.

A telling example is the English new town of Milton Keynes, established in 1967 under a plan influenced by the centrifugal concept of the city developed in California by Melvin M. Webber. The resulting sprawl houses a population only two-thirds the size of Florence (a city you can walk across) spread over eighty-eight square miles of aesthetic pollution, absorbing and extinguishing villages, towns, and farms in a tangle of thruways and roundabouts, with the population trapped in little globules between the streams of fast-flowing automobiles. The center of Milton Keynes is recognizable as such only by its superlative ugliness, and it provides the residents with no place of social pilgrimage, no precinct for “hanging out” or being at ease with neighbors; it is simply a place you visit out of necessity when the food runs out.

Nothing is more important to a city than its center, and when the center decays, the result is an ecological disaster.

The problem with Milton Keynes is less planning itself than using the wrong kind of plan. Washington, DC, one of the most successful urban environments in America, was planned—admittedly by a Frenchman, but nevertheless in a way that enabled the city to grow in answer to its needs while retaining the dignity of a metropolitan capital. Large areas of the great European cities were laid out by plans, and in Venice even the crenellations of the palazzi on the Grand Canal have been governed since the fifteenth century by city ordinances. The enormous number of planning disasters should not blind us to the planning successes, though they naturally raise the questions of what success amounts to and whether it can be measured, which I will explore later.

European examples do little to overcome another objection to planning. America is founded on a Constitution that guarantees the right to property and on a legal tradition that protects the right of owners to do what they wish with what is theirs. There are exceptions: notably, the use of eminent domain to confiscate property in the interests of the municipality or the state. But these exceptions are controversial and unpopular, and any attempt to introduce planning controls of the kind familiar in Europe would be greeted by the ordinary American with cries of indignation. Landmarks and places of extraordinary historical and aesthetic interest,
such as old Charleston, South Carolina, may be protected from destruction or alteration. But this is seen as a measure designed to preserve an existing heirloom, rather than as a guide to controlling how new things might be built or new settlements begun.

European planning controls do not merely conserve the past; they reach forward aggressively into the future. You cannot build a house in the Provençal countryside without obeying strict limitations on height and color and supplying the house with a roof of local pantiles—assuming you can get permission to build at all. In Brittany, walls must be white, and roofs must be pitched and made of slate. You cannot build a house in the English countryside unless you can make a case for it under the highly restrictive rules of the 1946 Town and Country Planning Act (now, however, under review). In some Swiss cantons, existing residents must approve new construction; before they vote on a proposal, they may demand a wooden model of the final result to see whether they could stomach it.

Americans react negatively when bossed around in this way. But they are just as appalled by ostentatious eyesores as their European peers and do not object to measures to protect shared amenities, such as beautiful landscapes, precious habitats, or notable landmarks. They happily accept Virginia’s scenic highway legislation even though it confiscates the right of landowners to place advertisements next to the road; they acknowledge that many good things in their environment—attractive roadsides, open spaces, subdued noise levels, the night sky—can be protected only as public goods, for which all must make a sacrifice. But the American homeowner believes that the right to property is a cornerstone of his way of life and that restrictions affecting the value and marketability of his house are unwarranted invasions of individual liberty.

This belief reflects the comparative mobility of American society. While Europeans move to new houses on average once or twice in their adult lives (depending on which country they reside in), Americans move every four years. Hence they regard their houses, as they regard their cars and furniture, as goods to be exchanged and replaced, rather than as destinies to cling to. Anything that affects the market price of their property affects their plans for the future. This American mobility has facilitated the rapid transfer of workforces across the country, from places in decline to places of growth. This partly explains the rise and fall of American cities. Populations are as likely to move out of American cities as into them, and the cities themselves have some of the character of industrial sites, which die when the factories close (like Buffalo or Baltimore) or spring up overnight like mushrooms in the wake of innovation (like Silicon Valley). But this mobility comes with a price.

The Decline of the City Center

A city may seem to be an industrial site when it is growing or dying. But in its zenith, it is a settlement with institutions, schools, hospitals, universities, and recreational facilities that cannot be easily moved and that serve to retain the population within their orbit. A city begins as a means but lives on as an end. The short-term economic purposes are then subsumed within the longer-term purpose of settlement, and even if the city’s population is constantly changing, it owes its attraction and success to what is permanent. Cities are made by their long-term residents, by the institutions and facilities that grow within their boundaries, and by the public-spirited benefactors who care for them as a home, as the Cone family cared for Baltimore or J. Pierpont Morgan for New York City.

Nothing is more important to a city than its center, and when the center decays, the result is an ecological disaster. Empty or vandalized lots, crime-ridden neighborhoods, declining schools, people who cannot move in search of work because their properties are unsellable: these are only some of the many problems that together defy our capacity to encompass and solve them.

Many causes have been assigned to the decline of city centers in America, and probably no single factor is pre-eminently to blame. Two factors, however, naturally stand out: the surrender of the downtown to business and the flight of residents to the suburbs. But which is cause, and which effect?

Businesses move downtown to enjoy the buzz of proximity and the infrastructure that makes business easy. People flee to the suburbs because the city center has become too costly, in terms of both taxes and crime. And of course, when the middle classes flee to the suburbs, the schools in the center go downhill, recreational facilities decay, and the city fathers are faced with the stark choice to be observed everywhere in America: museum or desert? Reflecting on this, many conservative-minded Americans tend to agree with the conclusion drawn forty years ago in a classic essay by Edward Banfield that the “downtown plus suburbs” model of the city is the inevitable consequence of rising affluence and falling transportation costs.4
Recent writers like Joel Kotkin and Robert Bruegmann have agreed, arguing forcefully that sprawl is the “market solution” to the problem of urban growth, and although it leads to results that some people find alarming—for instance, the spread of Chicago over 3,600 square miles—no solution exists that does not involve forcing people to live where they do not want to live or in a way they would not choose.

The popular counterargument is that sprawl is unsustainable and in any case, leads to the death of the city. Such is the contention of James Howard Kunstler in his influential books *The Geography of Nowhere* (1993) and *The Long Emergency* (2005), and it is a view with a considerable history. The attack on sprawl originates with the nineteenth-century British protests against the industrial city, mounted by John Ruskin, William Morris, and Philip Webb—which led to the twentieth-century attack on ribbon development by Clough Williams-Ellis and others, the defense of the bounded city by Lewis Mumford in his 1961 classic *The City in History*, and the New Urbanism movement in Europe and America today.

Williams-Ellis was an architect who initiated the campaign that led to the Town and Country Planning Act of 1946. This law places a “green belt” around British cities to contain all development within a fixed boundary. Although it has been challenged and is currently under review, the law has been in place for more than fifty years and has proven popular with the electorate, who react adversely to any suggestion that it might be relaxed. This does not contradict Kotkin and Bruegmann’s assertion that sprawl results from people getting what they want. It merely affirms that, when many people individually get what they want, the result may be something they collectively dislike.

Whatever side we take in this debate, it is surely true that many of the most important cultural and social functions of the city cannot be performed by a conurbation without a heart. Yet that is what a city becomes when the people who frequent it have their homes elsewhere. The suburbanized city is a city of absentees. Although people frequent it by day for the purpose of earning money, they vacate it at night, and therefore it cannot bring people together in activities of citizenship. Public lectures, clubs and colleges, theaters and concerts, festive meals and the ordinary mingling of strangers in bars and restaurants—all these are goods that a city
provides and the true reason cities are needed. A city is
a market not only for stocks and shares, but also for ideas
and values and for crafts and skills. It is a place where
strangers can spend leisure time and form networks of
friendship and recreation that enhance the quality of life
and renew commitment to the public realm.

Conservatives may say that such things will come to
exist provided people want them and provided no system
of rules and regulations gets in their way. But the fact is
that these outcomes are killed by distance and gradually
wither as the city expands. This is one major cause of
the decline in the volunteer culture, which has been
documented by Robert Putnam and others. The local
associations observed and praised by Alexis de Tocqueville
came into being among people who could easily turn
up to a meeting or join in a band. But how can weekly
meetings bring people together from both ends of
Chicago? Equally, the volunteer culture declines when
the locations where the work takes place fall into disre-
pair or are “uglified” by the wrong kind of building. And
the uglification of the downtown occurs as soon as no
resident remains to protest against it.

The centrifugal city may seem sustainable in a time of
cheap oil and easy transport. But even the office blocks
are now beginning to move to the “edge city” described
and in part endorsed by Joel Garreau.6 Unfortunately,
they leave a wasteland behind them. The abandoned
city of empty glass towers is incapable of adapting to new
forms of life and wholly without any social or cultural
presence. The only way forward (other than costly
demolition) is to shift the center of the city elsewhere,
as London’s center has shifted west or New York’s has
shifted north from Wall Street to Greenwich Village.

But suppose a city retains some kind of center. The
real questions remain those Jane Jacobs and her followers
posed: Can our cities be planned in such a way that peo-
ple will want to move to the center? Is there an incen-
tive that might be released by the right kind of plan and
that is strong enough to overcome the flight to the sub-
urbs, bringing the bourgeoisie back where they belong? It
seems to me that this attraction to the center marks the
success of planning, and the desire to escape its failure.

The problem is not particular to America. The new
cities of China are being built on the American model;
the Victorian cities of India are being bulldozed to make
way for American-style downtown areas; American con-
struction firms and architects are taking advantage of the
developments springing up all over Asia and bringing
with them the downtown plus suburbs concept because
they know no other and can easily persuade the local
municipalities to agree with them.

Many suggestions have been made as to how an
attraction to the center might be generated. Building
downtown convention centers, expensive museums, and
concert halls; offering tax credits for city-center busi-
nesses; creating enterprise zones; and removing some of
the regulations that make living, moving, and trading
downtown so difficult have all been tried, and none has
worked.7 And the reason they do not work is because
they are addressing symptoms instead of causes. People
flee from city centers because they do not like city centers.
And they do not like city centers because they are alien-
ating, ugly, and without a human face. Or rather, they do
not like city centers when they are alienating, ugly, and
inhuman, the normal case in America.

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But that is not always the case in America or else-
where, nor does it need to be the case today. We are
familiar with the “broken window” theory advanced by
James Q. Wilson and George Kelling in The Atlantic
Monthly in 1982, according to which neighborhoods that
seem to be abandoned soon are abandoned.8 Broken win-
dows attract more broken windows, graffiti attract graff-
iti, neglect attracts neglect. The smallest amount of
policing, sufficient to prevent that first broken window,
might save a whole neighborhood from otherwise inex-
orable decay.

The Role of Aesthetics

The broken window theory, in my view, is simply the first
step toward a more comprehensive view of the city as an
aesthetic creation. Cities degenerate when they are seen as
mere instruments, temporary structures that are aban-
doned when their purpose is fulfilled. Already the down-
town has the appearance of such a place at night, when
its temporary occupants have fled to the suburbs; this is
still more true when it is built so that appearances do not
matter, when utility stares from every glass façade, and
when the demands of the human eye are everywhere
repulsed or ignored. A city becomes a settlement when it
is treated not as a means but as an end in itself, and the
sign of this is the attempt by residents, planners, and architects to fit things together, as you fit things together in your home or your room, to offer welcome vistas and a friendly patina.

The proof of this is easy to find in the old cities of Europe. People choose to live in the center of Paris, Rome, Prague, or London rather than the periphery. Others who do not live in those cities want to spend their vacations there to enjoy the culture, entertainment, and beauty of their surroundings. These are flourishing cities, in which people of every class and occupation live side by side in mutual dependency while maintaining the distance that is one of the great gifts of the urban way of life. And there is a simple explanation for this: People wish to live in the center of Paris because it is beautiful. It is also lively and rich in every kind of cultural and recreational opportunity. But it is rich because people of all walks of life live there—not just people engaged in specific occupations, but also the cultural elite—and this has made Paris a symbol of the urban experience, the cité pleine de rêves (“city full of dreams”) of Baudelaire.

Paris became beautiful over many centuries, through both the effect of top-down decrees of monarchs and ecclesiastics and the bottom-up consensus on how the residents should build. The city was radically altered by the plans of Baron Haussmann. But these plans were executed in a way that respected the prevailing aesthetic values: that is to say, they used materials, forms, and scales that derived from existing precedents and blended with the urban fabric. Many regretted the destruction of the medieval Paris invoked by Victor Hugo in Nôtre Dame de Paris. But with the exception of a few blemishes, Paris has maintained its aesthetic identity, attracting culture, education, and social life to its center, where agreeable streets are maintained by committed residents.

Two kinds of planning laws exist: those that are applied by the municipal authorities and those that empower the residents to decide what may be built in their neighborhoods. The assumption in France is that the people are far too likely to make aesthetic mistakes or to be corrupted by local interests to be entrusted with a jewel like Paris. Hence, the planning decisions are imposed from above. Nevertheless, these laws have two
important features that seem to be vital to the success of cities and that should also provide the model for American urbanization.

First, they are conceived as side constraints, rather than descriptions of some goal to be achieved. They do not tell us how the city should ultimately be, only what cannot be done during the course of its growth. Limits on height and scale, materials, and architectural details are laid down to ensure that whatever is built or renovated will conform to its surroundings. New buildings will fit in with the old, since they will share a language of form.

Secondly, the side constraints are aesthetic. They govern not what goes on inside a building, but how it looks from outside. In other words, they concern how the building fits into its surroundings. Of course, other constraints exist, not all of which would be acceptable to the freedom-loving conscience. But the lesson to learn is that aesthetic side constraints are enough to make a centripetal city: they are all that is needed to attract residents into the center.

When aesthetic constraints are obeyed, people also come to hang out. When they are disobeyed, people flee. And where some people hang out, others come to hang out with them. The first aesthetic success is like the broken window, though working in the opposition direction: just as failure breeds failure, success breeds success. This we have seen in Boston’s Faneuil Hall Marketplace, which has brought people back to the city center, to some extent undoing the destructive work of the modernist Boston City Hall next door.

Other matters are relevant to the flourishing of a city: education; law enforcement; the circulation of traffic; lighting; public spaces; and the opening of the city to activities like worship, theatrical performance, and sports that require extensive cooperation if they are to emerge. But the lesson to be drawn from the centripetal cities of Europe is that all such matters are far less important than the side constraints that endow a city with its aesthetic identity. Those constraints are the sine qua non of successful urbanization, and their absence has caused the decline and fall of the American city.

The City as a Home

The centripetal city is the city of the bourgeoisie, the city that attracts into its center the prosperous and adventurous middle classes who are not only the catalyst of economic life but also the ones who will invest in public order, rescue the schools from collapse, support the life of the theater and concert hall, fill and endow the universities, and even, from time to time, establish think tanks devoted to the perpetuation of shared ideas.

The principle I am advocating can be illustrated as well from American as from European instances. New York City owes its centripetal nature to the attractive areas that have retained their aesthetic identity despite changes in use and lifestyle through the twentieth century. Just ask yourself why people want to live in
Greenwich Village or why the flamboyant neoclassical warehouses of Lower Manhattan have survived and adapted to every shift in the spirit of the city. Of course, the fabric of a city like New York is being constantly torn apart and renewed, and this means that few things are constant unless kept in place by some municipal edict. This makes conservatives nervous about aesthetic constraints: who conceives them, who applies them, and how do we protect the right of property against their abuse?

Rather than answering those questions in this brief *Outlook*, I shall leave them with the reader, because to me they define the real problem of planning. Our efforts should be directed to designing cities where residents are *at home* in surroundings that acquire the patina of home, and in which buildings happily meet us and adapt to our interests in just the way that people do.

**Notes**


