The City as Work of Art

For Comment

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The city is by definition *a work of art*. True, most cities are built cheaply and in poor taste, but the future of the world is an urban one according to the Bible. What follows are *ten theses* that argue for the artistic significance of cities.

1. **Public Spaces provide spaces for democratic participation and civil discourse.** In the Constitution of the United States, the significance of public spaces is assumed. “Public spaces can foster meaningful relationships by providing opportunities to participate in communal activity. Encounters with strangers in public settings can vitally contribute to people’s development of self-identity.”

2. **Public Spaces provide green space, contributing to a healthy environment.** Progressives in the early 19th century believed that public playgrounds and green spaces would redeem and restore the individual and the community. These progressives believed that people were products of their environment, so they sought to create the “city beautiful” that would positively enhance human life and culture. This idea still influences city planning today.

3. **Public Spaces provide a place for escape and introspection away from the hustle and bustle of the city.** With the restoration of Grant Park and the building of Millennium Park in Chicago, residents and tourists alike achieve private solace and cultural enrichment in musical concerts, the enjoyment of public sculpture, the peaceful beauty of formal and informal gardens, and the staging of public festivals and sports events or recreational activities.

4. **Public Spaces contribute to the aesthetics and the beautification of the city.** For Chicago, its front yard is the two mile stretch of Grant Park, and behind it is the most photographed skyline in North America replete with 19th century architectural gems known as the “Michigan Avenue Street Wall.”

5. **The arts in public spaces provide spaces for individual and group self-expression.** Parks and city plazas such as Chicago’s Federal Plaza are staging areas for marches, parades, celebrations of sports championships, announcements for political office, and are spaces for protest against war or for demonstrations for various social causes.

6. **The arts in public spaces contribute to the memory and identity of a metropolitan and national community.** Public spaces provide opportunities for remembrance and reflection on a community’s history and identity. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann writes in his classic study, *The Land*: “Place is space with historical meanings, where
some things have happened which are now remembered and provide continuity and identity across generations.\footnote{3}

7. **Public spaces and the arts in public spaces contribute to the vitality and economic growth of a city.** In the post-industrial economy, many cities rely on tourism and conventions to support economic vitality and growth. The arts embellish public spaces and are key assets and are also strategies for urban economic revitalization.

8. **Public spaces make cities more humane and reveal a city’s intrinsic sacred essence.** “All the land is mine” says the Lord in the book of Leviticus. “Every square inch” said Abraham Kuyper. The architecture of prominent churches once dominated urban landscapes. Today, public spaces afford opportunities to celebrate the sacred and to argue for sacred causes.

9. **Cities made beautiful illustrate the creative gifts of human beings.** Public spaces in cities reveal the creative artistry of its people, and the still presence of the imago dei in all people. Public spaces provide settings for photo exhibits like the Earth from Above or artistic creations such as Cool Globes— which provide a way to educate the public about the beauty of the earth and our stewardship challenges of ecological and environmental sustainability.

10. **Cities made beautiful magnify the gifts and the creative power of the divine.** The parks of Chicago and the setting of Lake Michigan provide a dramatic backdrop for this “world class city.” Its “prairie-style” landscaping and use of native plants embellish the Creator’s work. For the theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper: “art points out to the Calvinist both the still visible lines of the original plan, and what is even more, the splendid restoration by which the Supreme Artist and Master-Builder will one day renew and enhance even the beauty of His original creation.”\footnote{4}

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\footnote{1}{See T.J. Gorridge, *A Theology of the Built Environment: Justice, Empowerment, Redemption* (Cambridge, 2002).}
\footnote{3}{Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Fortress Press, 1977), 5.}
\footnote{4}{Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 155.}