School of Architecture applies Catholic social thought to develop more accessible neighborhoods

**By Emily Stimpson**

What do pizza, architecture and the Catholic faith have in common?

More than you think, says Philip Bess, professor and director of Graduate Studies at the University of Notre Dame’s School of Architecture.

“A city neighborhood should be like a slice of pizza,” he explained. “Just as a slice of pizza has all the same ingredients as the rest of the pizza, a neighborhood should be made up of the same things that make up the rest of the city — single family homes, multi-family homes, retail shops, schools, churches, parks.”

And as for the Catholic faith? In that kind of neighborhood, Bess continued, it’s arguably easier for Catholic social teachings and human beings to flourish.

**Building for people**

Exactly how and why that’s the case is, in part, what students at Notre Dame are there to learn. Today, the school boasts the only architecture program in the country whose core curriculum centers on classical architecture and traditional urban design. The program also introduces students to the relationship between Catholic social teaching and design.

In layman’s terms, that means students go there to learn how to build beautiful buildings and design traditional communities that are at the service of cities and the people who inhabit them.

“We believe, in a certain sense, that the city is more important than architecture,” explained Bess.

That belief stands in stark contrast to the philosophies and practices that have shaped most architectural schools for more than 60 years — philosophies and practices that Bess and other faculty members hold at least partly responsible for problems ranging from alienation to pollution, stress and the frenetic busyness of modern families.

Topping the list of problematic ideas, said Bess, is the assumption that “whatever building you’re working on is properly and primarily an expression of yourself, and therefore should be innovative, something never seen before.”

By placing a premium on self-expression rather than on creating communities in which people can live, learn and care for one another, most modern architecture, according to Bess, is “the physical expression of a culture of individualism.”

Bess sees that same culture of individualism reflected in the design of post-War suburbs, where the No. 1 concern of most city planners is “handling cars” — the natural consequence of zoning laws that mandate people live in one area, work in another and shop in another still.

“If you live in a subdivision, you can’t even walk to get a gallon of milk,” he said. “That makes cars not a luxury or a convenience but a necessity. It also means we’re building environments for cars, not people.”

**Overcoming isolation**

Will Dowdy, a student in Notre Dame’s program, adds that suburban sprawl isolates people according to age and income level, as well as limits the mobility of those too young or too infirm to drive.

Accordingly, he said, “you lose the diversity, support and wisdom that comes with people at different stages in life living together.”

It also isolates the less fortunate and forces families to spend the better part of their day in cars, commuting and chauffeuring children to and from activities.

“The way most of our suburbs are structured fragments our lives,” said Dowdy. “That’s not how we were created to live. And the more we fragment our lives, the more we become fragmented as persons.”

Add all of those problems together and few aspects of Catholic social teaching are left standing. Not the virtue of solidarity, which emphasizes the importance of community. Not subsidiarity, which stresses local responses to local needs. And not the preferential option for the poor, which urges communities to care for its weakest members.

To correct those problems, Notre Dame is doing more than just teaching students to build buildings and plan cities that respond to people’s need for beauty and community. They’re actually helping people do that now.

Two years ago, the curriculum of the urban design concentration was restructured to include a practicum in which graduate students work with local communities to address the pressures of growth.

Last year, Dowdy was part of a team that helped Cooperstown, N.Y., devise a 50-year development plan. Their proposal included adding a neighborhood to the town and connecting to older neighborhoods by a park, not a highway. That same plan kept shops, schools, libraries and other public spaces within easy walking distance.

**Humane environments**

One year ago, Notre Dame also launched the Center for Building Communities, a program within the architecture school that executive director Ron Sakal said, “helps provide humane and good design for people who can’t afford it.”

Under the direction of Sakal and his wife, Sallie Hood, students in the CBC program have worked with community development groups in Elkhart, Ind.; Conway, Ark.; Los Angeles, Calif.; and Benton Harbor, Mich...to address challenges posed by urban exodus and suburban sprawl.

According to Sakal, the program teaches students to put into practice the importance of building homes and community spaces that are affordable, sustainable and informed by Catholic social thought. Their projects have included designs for low-income housing, proposals for reviving abandoned downtowns and plans for improving parks and recreational spaces.

Sakal says there is a growing audience for the CBC’s services, as well as Notre Dame’s architectural alumni.

“People haven’t changed much over time. Their needs and activities remain pretty much constant. When you create an environment that responds to that, they recognize the difference,” he said. “The dominant suburban planning style has made life more difficult, more complicated for just about everyone,” Hood added. “People just need to realize there is an alternative that will help them live a more human, more humane life.”

Emily Stimpson is a contributing editor to Our Sunday Visitor.

---

**BEHIND THE WHEEL**

With so many Americans spending so much time on the road each day, designing cities and communities around cars has become commonplace in most urban planning offices.

247,421,120
Number of registered cars in America in 2005

<200 million
Number of registered drivers in America in 2005

90
Percentage of Americans who drive to work

25 minutes
Average commute

90 minutes
Average time spent in a car per day

50 million
Number of Americans stuck in traffic jams per week

$250,000
Average amount spent on cars in a person’s lifetime

**Sources:** ABC News, U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Transportation

---

**OUR SUNDAY VISITOR | MAY 18, 2008**