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A Place Apart: The Architecture of Ideas

You will be forgiven if at first you believe that what follows is a form of nostalgia. After all, it is commonly believed that history, the quest for and remembrance of things past, is only a superior form of nostalgia and that old historians, especially those beyond the advanced retirement ages of the present, are especially likely to indulge a penchant for the past seen as the “good old past.”

After listening attentively to a lecture on the Enlightenment idea of progress, a student came to me and said, “Professor Tonsor, you don’t seem to believe in progress”—to which I replied, “You are approximately correct.” “But,” the student countered, “if you don’t believe in progress what do you believe in?”

There are, of course, two ways, both fallacious, in which historians often view the past—“the good old past” and “the bad old past.” Both wish to transform the present on the basis of images they hold of the past. Both are mistaken because the real past, quite independently of the image I may hold of it, lives on into the present and is determinative of the present and the future.

A recent cartoon in *National Review* puts the problem of the relationship of history to nostalgia in context.¹ A senior professor of history (he is bearded and

wears a tie) holds a thesis before himself and is saying to a seated student, “First of all, a master’s thesis should never start out, ‘Return with us now to those thrilling days of yesteryear.’”

I do not intend to “return to those thrilling days of yesteryear” but I do intend to show you that there was a yesteryear, that it lives on into the present, and that it may have something important to say to the present, something which our confused, uncertain, and groping present ought to think about.

Some of the most visible evidences of the past are those great artifacts of history we call public and private buildings. The history of our attitudes to public and private buildings over the period of my lifetime is a matter of extraordinary cultural interest. I was born in the early 1920s and entered college at age seventeen in 1941. The “new” in architecture in that era was the modernist art deco style which characterized the Chicago World’s Fair of 1932—to be followed in the ’30s and ’40s by the international style which swept away every historicist reference.

The dream of the architect was to re-

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shape the world architecturally in the modes of reason and function. The provincial and the historicist were to disappear to be replaced by a glittering modernist Utopia; it made no difference whether the setting was Paris, New York, or the Yale University campus.

At the end of World War II, the cities of Central Europe were nearly totally devastated. The mountains of rubble were hauled away, and city fathers, whether in Western Europe or the Soviet satrapies, proceeded to rebuild in the going modernist style. Of course, there were exceptions to this. St. Michael's Church in Munich, which had been bombed to dust and ashes, was lovingly restored to a condition superior to that on the eve of World War II.

Its counterpart in name, though hardly in architectural importance, St. Michael's Cathedral in Coventry, England, had similarly been bombed and burned. It was not rebuilt in the original beautiful English perpendicular style of the late Medieval period, but in a soulless and depraved version of international modernist architecture.

While Munich was able to reestablish a living religious tradition by the meticulous reconstruction of the historic St. Michael's, Coventry created a tasteless modernist monument to a dying faith. The architect of the Coventry cathedral, Sir Basil Spence, "said that his airy, accordion-sided design in pink sandstone had appeared to him in a vision when he was coming around, from the anesthetic in the dentist's chair."² One is reminded of Frank Lloyd Wright's observation, "Doctors bury their mistakes. Architects can only advise their clients to plant vines."

Of course, churches were not the only buildings to be reconstructed at the war's end, reconstructed or demolished and replaced. In East Berlin the Communist government of the so-called German Democratic Republic demolished the remains of

Karl Friedrich von Schinkel's (1831-36) Bauakademie School of Architecture. Schinkel, described in a recent exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London as "a universal man" was one of the most creative painters and architects of the nineteenth century. Instead of the East German government restoring this monument to creativity, the Bauakademie was demolished and replaced by a ferro-cement, steel, and aluminum monstrosity which served to house the East German foreign office.

The bombed-out heart of Dresden, which in its pre-World War II state many believed to be the most beautiful city north of the Alps, was hauled away in dump trucks to be replaced by a "worker's city" of soulless and tacky buildings.

But the Bolsheviks were not the only modernist vandals. All across Germany and Central Europe the "old" was swept away and was replaced by a "new" which made few references to tradition, a historic past, and an aesthetic heritage—and even fewer concessions to human psychology and to indigenous and provincial styles.

Then a curious thing happened. Ordinary men and women discovered that they needed the past after all; that Munich ought to look like Munich and not Chicago, that a great old, restored opera house such as the Semperoper in Dresden or the opera in Munich or Frankfurt had more meaning and often a better sound than a new opera house such as the Lincoln Center in New York City.

The first of the great restoration projects of old cities, the medieval and baroque heart of so many Central European towns and cities, was the reconstruction of the old city of Warsaw. The Poles were fortunate in having detailed measurements and drawings of the inner city of Warsaw, and the paintings of Antonio Canaletto (1697-1768) and Bernardo Bellotto (1720-80) were indispensable in the recreation of the

atmosphere and details of these Central European towns. The loving recreation of the old city of Warsaw by Polish craftsmen put them in high demand throughout Europe in the enormous task of the recreation and reproduction of these great lost masterpieces of the builder's art and vision.

But just what were Poles, Germans, Czechs, Hungarians, and Austrians rebuilding? Were they simply on a nostalgic trip through a Central European equivalent of Disneyland? Emphatically, "No!" They knew that the historical study of architecture is a variety of intellectual history, that every building is the distillation and instantiation of past consciousness, the concretization of past experience. The past spoke and speaks to those men who restored and are restoring the Central European cityscape, just as the past speaks to us when, for example, we visit the "Old House" that John Adams and John Quincy Adams built at Quincy, Mass.

This is not the place to discuss the ideological content or aesthetic values of past cityscapes. It is sufficient here to assert that architecture always has an ideological content, that it is the distillation of past experience, that it is history speaking to us. What these buildings and the way in which they are arranged in the city or landscape say to us is important because they are our past. They tell us the way we have come and they explain us to ourselves.

I want now to consider a distinctive and particular set of buildings, as distinctive as any in America and one which has in the past, and continues into the present, to play a determinative role in our society.

The collegiate and university campus is distinctively American even though it may have European monastic antecedents and even though it may be modeled on English prototypes. Some years ago, as a member of the North Central Association accredita-

tion teams, I was told repeatedly by college administrators that they feared that their reclusive campuses would not be able to attract students dazzled and lured away by the bright lights and flesh pots of city universities and colleges. What could have led to the foundation of Kenyon College which, at the time of its founding, was in the Ohio wilderness? Why did the founders of Principia College in Elmhurst, Illinois, choose the proximity of a beautiful village nestled in the hollows of the great rivers? What could have led to the choice of location of Sewanee University? Who could have dared, as the founders of Doane College dared, to locate a campus on the windswept plains of Nebraska? The dean at Doane remarked to me that a number of students left Doane each year after a few weeks because they could not tolerate the constant blowing of the prairie wind. One college president observed to me, "I like to say that this is not the end of the world, but you can see the end of the world from here." American college founders seem to have had an almost Cistercian affinity for the wilderness and the dark untended valley.

Was this choice of an out-of-the-way place, "a place apart," simply the reflection of the ethos of a frontier society or did it reflect a deeper and more coherent notion of what education was about? I believe it was the latter and I would like now to turn to a consideration of what the content of that vision was and is.

The historian of architecture, Robert A.M. Stern, quotes Thomas Jefferson who said in a letter of advice to the trustees of a lottery for East Tennessee College:

I consider the common plan favored in this country, but not in others, of making one large and expensive building as unfortunately erroneous. It is infinitely better to erect a small and separate lodge for each professorship, with only a hall below for his class, and two chambers above for himself; joining these lodges by bar-

racks for a certain portion of the students opening into a covered way to give a dry communication between all the schools the whole of these arranged around an open square of grass and trees would make it, what it should be in fact, an academical village, instead of a large and common den of noise, of filth, and of fetid air.³

Jefferson's advice was, of course, carried out in his plans for the University of Virginia. The basic plan then, following Jefferson's inspired design, for American Colleges, Universities, and Prep-schools was that of an academic village.

That this design should have such persuasive power was no accident, for Americans, in these first decades of the life of the Republic, had come to see their villages and towns as having above all an educational mission.

Concord, Massachusetts was such a place in 1854, when Henry David Thoreau published *Walden*, or, *Life in the Woods*, an intellectually exciting and most unusual village. Still Thoreau found it lacking. After complaining in *Walden* of the inadequacy of Concord education, Thoreau goes on to say,

...It is time we had uncommon schools, that we did not leave off our education when we begin to be men and women. It is time that our villages were universities, and their elder inhabitants the fellows of universities, with leisure—if they are indeed so well off—to pursue liberal studies the rest of their lives. Shall the world be confined to one Paris or one Oxford forever? Cannot students be boarded here and get a liberal education under the skies of Concord? Can we not hire some Abelard to lecture to us?...

The idea of the college and the village as University had much in common as a number of Utopian communitarian experiments demonstrated. The most interesting of these by far, from an educational viewpoint, was Robert Owen's New Harmony, Indiana. Those of you who have visited this extraordinary village know how much it

resembles a college campus, and those of you who have studied the structure and program of this "backwoods utopia" know how deeply educational its objectives were.

What were the ideas that lay behind this notion of villages as universities and university and college villages? In the first instance, I believe it is the idea of communitarianism. Education is something we pursue in community, with friends, neighbors, and as an element in the practice of civic virtue. The objectives of liberal education cannot be achieved either in isolation or in the megalopolitan outheap of Behemoth University. The college is the neighborhood of science.

Secondly, villages and colleges alike had their own distinctive character and their unique and particular objectives.

What Jefferson called "a large and common den of noise, of filth, and of fetid air," was, in spatial terms, the university conceived vertically rather than horizontally. It was Moscow University imprisoned in its high tower of Stalinist gingerbread vs. the thousands of acres of the Stanford University campus.

The vertically conceived college or university is organized from the top down, spatially and rationally. Decision making is concentrated in a few hands and their offices are usually located on the top floor of the university tower. The elevators, the lifts are the physical lines of communication between the units of the college. Even the fortuitous, that is, the accidentally conceived, campus such as that of Roosevelt University in Chicago, must struggle against the inherent tendency of its architecture.

The horizontally conceived university or college campus is one in which administrative power is dispersed rather than concentrated, in which there is an organic relationship between the landscape and the buildings of the campus. The horizontally conceived campus tends to become a fed-

eral republic of letters.

Not only were most colleges and universities founded before 1850 not state supported and regulated, they had, for the most part, individual and unique sets of educational objectives. The great glory of American higher education is the fact that the determinative colleges and universities, the pace setters, are privately funded and governed. That this independence and autonomy has been seriously weakened in the last three decades threatens all American education. The hundreds of small colleges, each with its vision of the good life and the education necessary for securing that vision has given American education a dynamic and creativity to be found nowhere else in the world. The leftist experimentalism of Black Mountain College, the bold and successful entertainment of ideas out of the mainstream by the University of Chicago, the transmission of Continental European ideas to the U.S. by the New School in New York City, and a hundred other successful efforts to pursue a unique educational path are reason enough to glory in the “places apart” that have characterized American education. Religion, of course, has been the greatest differentiator in American colleges and universities. All of this has given higher education a depth and variety unknown elsewhere. Those struggling colleges in out of the way places are very important to us.

If, however, they lose their unique character and decide to become miniature versions of the State University, they will have corrupted their essential character and lost their meaning. Faculty recruitment plays a most important role in the preservation of difference. State intervention, PC schemes, the pursuit of ideological multiculturalism, the avaricious padding of already bloated budgets, is the road to ruin. America is a land of separatists. It is a land formed “one out of many,” and while our unity is axiomatic we must not forget our differences.

It will be argued that geographic and cultural isolation will make useful participation in the “real world” impossible. That the special objectives and the “places apart” which have characterized American education in the past will make it irrelevant to the engaged life of the twentieth century. What has scholastic philosophy or the *Book of Mormon* to do with our computer-driven world of multiculturalism?

In Arnold Toynbee’s acute analysis of the growth of civilizations in his now neglected *Study of History*, Toynbee argues that determinative in the growth of civilizations is the role of “creative minorities.” These “creative minorities” are not accidental collocations of dissident groups but rather the self-conscious movement of individuals and groups toward a new civilizational ideal. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the seedbeds of these creative minorities have been the separatist religious communities, the utopian experiments, the colleges and universities.

Fundamental in the development of these “creative minorities” has been the role of individuals and groups characterized by what Toynbee describes as the movement of “withdrawal and return.” In these great creative moments, individuals withdraw from the household of the parent culture, go into Plato’s cave, into the desert, into the hermitage, into the monastery, out to Walden pond, or into the college, only to return to the parent society as a powerful leaven which transforms the whole.

The purpose of education is to enable humankind to develop a unique and powerful insight into the nature of reality and the human condition, the kind of insight one cannot get from a computer program. The role of the “place apart,” the medieval fortresses on the Midway and at West Point, the out of the way colleges scattered across the American landscape, is to provide a

setting for the development of the unique insight and the sense of cultural mission.

But what if the salt loses its savour? What if Oberlin or Connecticut Wesleyan cease to be unique and become diminished duplicates of the State University? What if their professors all subscribe to the current ideological, critical, and scientific orthodoxies? Geographic isolation or the building of a wall or the placement of gates (as at Yale) will not secure the unique role of the college and university in our society. Architecture cannot secure the benefits which the spirit has rejected.

It will be argued that the “place apart” is an ivory tower, an escape from the realities of everyday existence. What we need, these savants will argue, is a new conception of the university and college as a location on the internet rather than a place in the landscape. To cast the question in these terms is to confuse information with knowledge, insight with facticity, an Orwellian “Newspeak” with the richness of scientific dialogue and poetry.

But is it true that the “place apart” is an ivory tower, a refuge from the world rather than a place where men and women prepare themselves for more intense engagement in their culture?

I turn back to Thoreau at Walden Pond who wrote:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could learn what it had to teach, and not when I come to die, to discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know

it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion....

That was and should remain the great goal of American higher education, the purpose of “the place apart.”

The content of that education cannot be a fixed canon of books. To be sure, when Thoreau went out to Walden he kept a copy of Homer’s *Iliad* open before himself on the table. Moreover, studying the sexual proclivities of Medieval nuns, a favorite topic of history courses in a number of American universities, is not too likely to help one drive life into a corner.

The content of education will not be a fixed canon but rather a set of perennial questions about the nature and meaning of the human condition and experience and the meaning of experiential reality. To be sure the best that humankind has written and thought will form the content of that education. There are “books apart” as well as “places apart” and the two are complementary.

I still recall the books that formed and shaped me, when at seventeen I was a college freshman. I still recall the place where I read and thought about them. I recall an afternoon, sitting on an old-fashioned stile over a fence on the South Campus, reading aloud with my wife-to-be Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. In a “place apart” I drove something more than life into a corner.

Notes

1. *National Review* (Dec. 31, 1995), 31. 2. Kennedy Fraser, “Straying From the Way,” in *The New Yorker*, Dec. 4, 1995, 52. 3. Jefferson, May 6, 1810 (Jefferson Papers [Library of Congress], in Mary N. Woods, “Thomas Jefferson and the University of Virginia, Planning the Academic Village,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 44, Oct. 1985), 269. (Quoted from: *Pride of Place: Building the American Dream* [N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1986], 41).