Civitas and Democracy: The role of placemaking in our current political culture (excerpts from his book *Common Place II*)

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Without community, without civitas, we are all doomed to private worlds that are more selfish and loveless than they need be. As our society becomes more privatized and our culture more narcissistic, the need and appetite to be part of something bigger than our individual selves grow. Organized religion and individual spiritual development answer this need for many people. For some people, however, belonging to a community or "polis" may be the highest expression of this spiritual need. And for all members of society, there is the need to be part of some social structure. People are social animals, and our need to share and to love makes community a sine qua non of existence. On the other hand, humans also have a fundamental need to express themselves as individuals, to individuate themselves psychologically and socially, even to excel and rise above the crowd. A community must simultaneously nurture both a respect for group values and a tolerance for individuality, even eccentricity. This is the paradox of community that will forever require readjustments.

To quote Bart Giamatti, former president of Yale University and of baseball's National League:

> Over millennia, this refinement of negotiation—of balancing private need and public obligation, personal desire and public duty, and keen interests of the one and the many into a common, shared set of agreements —becomes a civilization. That is the public version of what binds us. That state is achieved because city dwellers as individuals or as families or as groups have smoothed the edges of private desire so as to fit, or at least work in, with all the other city dwellers, without undue abrasion, without sharp edges forever nicking and wounding, each refining an individual capacity for those thousands of daily, instantaneous negotiations that keep crowded city life from becoming a constant brawl or ceaseless shoving match.

Society must strive to be both tolerant and just enough to allow minority groups and subcultures to coexist with dignity and in peace. Achieving this tolerance is easier said than done, as America has found after centuries of slavery and immigration. It is becoming an even bigger challenge as more and more Americans grow up without firsthand experience and skills in city living. "There are now several generations of Americans who have no idea or experience of the kinds of tolerance and cooperation which are implicit in higher density neighborhoods or communities."

Community must deal with the full range of human nature, including its own dark side. If it projects its own dysfunction and pathologies onto an outside enemy or stigmatized minority, it has not fully faced itself and is in collective denial. More typically, the unity in community is bought at the price of identifying enemies, who are sure to return the favor. Enemies will get even some day, as the chain reaction of intolerance and injustice is perpetuated. If this dialectic is an inevitable part of the human condition, the question arises as to what is the most hospitable scale for

social harmony and political unity and the least hospitable scale for hatred and enmity. It begs a deeper question: at what scale are civitas, justice and brotherly love best fostered? Ancient Greek philosophers suggested that 5000 citizens was an optimum size for a polis. (With wives, children and slaves, the total number must have been more like 25,000.) New Urbanism of course presents the case that neighborhood of a half mile on a side and the metropolitan region are the most sensible and equitable scales for community and governance in the metropolis.

Americans have been quick to exchange the more raw and uncomfortable sidewalk life of the inner city neighborhood for the easy and banal TV life of the suburban family room. We have been too quick to give up the public life that American cities have slowly mustered in spite of a long legacy of Jeffersonian rural yeomanry and anti-urbanism. It has been our good fortune that immigrants from countries with strong public realms (and cities where the wealthy citizens live downtown rather than at the periphery) have imported urban and ethnic values for which we are much the richer. But many European immigrants have wanted to leave the public life behind. Indeed, the pioneers of Modernism in Europe came out against traditional urban streets and the messy complexity they contain. The Athens Charter of C.I.A.M., led by the most mythical of all twentieth-century European architects, Le Corbusier, joined the battle for a more "rational" separation of vehicles and pedestrians in a new urban vision that spread to and across America.

African-Americans – the group brought to America most forcibly and most unfairly – have often maintained a strong and rich street life, as have Latinos. But European Americans have continued to flee the public realm – most recently from public city streets to the gated subdivisions of affluent, second ring suburbs. They have taken the money with them, and the best schools.

In the worst case, right and left wing groups have also tried to take government with them – to secede, in some cases entirely, from society, whether in extremist militia groups or religious communes. These radicals and fringe sects are nothing new in society and do not pose a numerical threat to civitas. However, they do tend at the moment to move the fulcrum of debate on community and privacy to the political right. The property rights movement is, in my opinion, one of the great threats to civitas. The conflict between private property rights and community rights could shake this country to its constitutional roots in the next decade, much as civil, women's and gay rights have done so in recent decades.

Property rightists must come to grips with the fact that rights attached to land ownership are part of a social contract and not inalienable, absolute, natural, or God-given. (If their Christian God gave land and property rights to anyone in this country, it was to the Native Americans.) Moreover, those who cry loudest about government "takings" are usually monumentally silent about "givings" that accrue to them as a result of government actions. If we are going to compensate landowners for their every loss, we should tax them for their every gain. A guarantee of risk-free land ownership and absolute protection of private property would ultimately rescind community and repeal civilization itself.

Few humans would deny the value of civitas, as well as of mutual respect and tolerance. But some contemporary critics question the notion of traditional community. They posit that communities of interest, including ones enabled by modern electronic communications, have supplanted what used to be communities of propinquity and place. This is not a new notion in America. Alexis de Tocqueville observed: "Americans of all ages, all stations of life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations . . . religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute."

It is an undeniable fact that telecommunications and computers have changed our lives in many ways and will continue to do so at an increasing rate. However, it is not evident that they have reduced our need for physical community. Indeed, living with a computer screen in your face all day and a telephone in your ear, with radio or CD in the background, may increase the appetite for physical community. As the poet and pundit Gary Snyder has said, the internet is not a community because you can't hug anyone on it. The world wide web may prove antithetical to community by providing anonymous sources with instantaneous access to vast audiences to which they are not

accountable. Never have such hidden voices had such access to such large audiences. Electronic snipers alongside the information highway are not engaging in public discourse, any more than a website can equal an Italian piazza. If anything, electronic communications have increased the human need for traditional neighborhoods with buildings you can kick and neighbors at whom you can wave or frown.

There are two ways to go with these weightless invisible electrons, which have no architectural palpability. One way is to accept, embrace and even celebrate their evanescence and flux, trying to make an architecture and urbanism that is transitory and ephemeral. This is the post-structuralist city of Rem Koolhaas and Zaha Hadid, where a physical public realm, indeed the very notion of urbanism, is denied – or at least transformed beyond recognition. The other way is to resist the electronic net as the public realm, to build a physical world of buildings, streets, plazas, and parks that encourage and dignify human interaction among friends and strangers, rich and poor, black and white, old and young. That is the time-tested strategy that New Urbanism has championed, not to exclude the electron but to control it.