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Seeking the Shalom of the City

Mandated lecture series during an architectural education are always entertaining, whether from the podium or the audience. Imagine such a moment from the wood pews of a midwestern Baptist chapel performing double duty as an architecture lecture hall.

Clamoring in the front row, students and theology professors sit, wide-eyed and beaming at their idol (recent or long-standing). Judson University’s “On Christ and Architecture” lecture series is culminating with its keynote lecturer, Nicholas Wolterstorff. He is an outsider, a tweeded theologian, whose graphite is limited to B2 and whose vellum contains the words of the Lord in red. The audience’s gradient shifts by the middle of the room. (Please do not think I mean a color gradient; it is likely safe to envision a sea of charcoal/black with an occasional flash of a De Stijl-approved color.) This is the realm of the student-critic, the present but unconvinced mind recently refueled by a cup of fair trade moral superiority. They are wary of his lecture title, “The Grand Charter of Christians Practicing Architecture.” Wolterstorff has turned his theological gaze toward design with the intent to frame a purposeful and ethical pursuit of urban and architectural development, providing a challenge to contemporary designers—whether citizens of the kingdom of God or not. At the back of the lecture hall, the air carries faint notes of glue and fear. The hushed symphony of clicking, cutting, and bandaging is the soundtrack of upcoming deadlines, which care not where the student was mandated to be. Wolterstorff is not going to finish their sections and elevations for them...

Wolterstorff begins in the Old Testament book of Jeremiah, chapter 29, verse 7. Herein, the Israelites are exiled in Babylon, prisoners in a foreign land. They are charged to, “seek the shalom of the city, for in its shalom they would find their shalom.” [1] Wolterstorff extrapolates:

I SUBMIT THAT IN THOSE FEW WORDS, “SEEK THE SHALOM OF THE CITY,” WE HAVE THE GRAND CHARTER FOR CHRISTIANS PRACTICING ARCHITECTURE—INDEED, FOR ANYONE PRACTICING ARCHITECTURE. MORE THAN ANY OF THE OTHER ARTS, ARCHITECTURE DETERMINES WHETHER THE CITY AND ITS INHABITANTS WILL EXPERIENCE SHALOM. THE ART OF ARCHITECTURE AIMS—OR SHOULD AIM—AT THE SHALOM OF THE CITY AND ITS INHABITANTS. [2]

Citation: Patrick Linder, “Seeking the Shalom of the City,” in the *Avery Review* 32 (May 2018), <http://averyreview.com/issues/32/shalom-of-the-city>.

[1] Jeremiah 29:7.

[2] Nicholas Wolterstorff, “On Christ in Architecture” (lecture series, Judson University, Elgin, IL, 2012).

Shalom, Wolterstorff continues, is usually translated as “peace.” But this translation inadequately conveys the nuance for the original audience—peaceful cohabitation is part of the prophet’s intent, but “shalom” means more than the absence of conflict or suffering. True shalom is a peaceful prosperity, a multidimensional type of flourishing. Reviewing the verse with this in mind, one reads, “Seek the flourishing of the city; for when the city flourishes you will flourish individually.”

As I delve into my own work that aims to help revitalize the neighborhoods of Detroit, specifically through addressing vacant lots and homes, I find myself returning to the ideas of this lecture. The city of Detroit, whose much-discussed decline has made it an endlessly repeated example of the post-industrial US city, is finally beginning to flourish again. But for whom? If our charge as equitable designers is “to seek the peaceful flourishing of the city,” what does this mean for those living within the results of our decisions? As we emerge from emergency managers and short-term solutions, how can designers provide platforms for future flourishing? Moreover, is this charge enduring enough to survive town halls, planning commissions, and value engineering (let alone bankruptcy proceedings, which Detroit is only beginning to emerge from), each of which brings design into contact (and often conflict) with external demands?

While Jeremiah 29:7 is written as a letter from the prophet to those experiencing their first diaspora, shalom can be experienced by any exile, ancient or modern. What better term is there for those fringes of a society whose majority of supposedly “public” places presuppose participation in particular economic and social norms? Their mere presence is misconstrued as loitering. These exiles are not the “targeted consumer” of our planned urban districts and are the minorities (of all kinds) who do not easily fit within “stakeholder” columns. The verse encourages the individual to pursue peaceful flourishing externally in order to find it internally. Shalom is not given but sought, yet environments can influence that pursuit. You can suffer in paradise if you hold hell within. Thus, the designer is not charged with providing individual shalom but the collective shalom of the city.

Being fundamentally deeper than what “peace” usually denotes, the complexities of shalom must be approached from multiple angles. Shalom’s defining characteristics, along with two tests for impostors, are provided within Wolterstorff’s lecture.

The first dimension of flourishing is the purposeful pursuit between the individual and the Divine. Wolterstorff characterizes this as a “day when human beings will no longer flee God down the corridors of time, a day when they will no longer turn in those corridors to defy their divine pursuer.” [3] This seeking of “divine communion” is one iteration of humanity’s ancient and enduring hunt for purpose. Framed outside Christendom, individual flourishing may be seen as losing oneself to a goal greater than individual enjoyment. A secular exemplar would be the Japanese concept of *ikigai*, defined as the “realization of what one hopes and expects through life,” formed through the overlap of passion, mission, profession, and vocation. [4] While shalom is social by nature, the individual must be a willing participant. Architecturally, this aspect of shalom may be experienced when form resonates with focus so that each is lost to the other.

[3] Wolterstorff, “On Christ in Architecture.”

[4] Hector Garcia and Francesc Miralles, *Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life* (New York: Penguin Publishing, 2017).

Within an urban context, form and focus temporarily blur when a neighborhood decides to inhabit its asphalt during a street fair. Herein, the individual efficiencies of automotive transit give way to meandering passages through curiosities and creatives. These transient bazaars use familiar elements of roof, wall, and counter to display oddities that aggregate into an architectural exposé of local interests. Shalom may be experienced within the sensory procession through the diversions of one's community. The street fair is not a purely architectural or economic pursuit. In fact, if most vendors honestly analyze their participation, weighing their time, investment, and opportunity cost, they are likely breaking even at best. Why participate, then? For some, the pursuit of kindred spirits of whatever interest the vendor is displaying beckons the individual to dialogue with the mass. The participation of the individual in something greater introduces another facet of shalom, belonging. Shalom is deeply social, embracing human society as a complex network whose prosperity relies on healthy relationships throughout the whole. Shalom exists when individuals flourish together.

The first hindrance to shalom is when "society" is understood as a collection of individuals vying for themselves. While a neoliberal mindset may argue that society creates an equilibrium when individuals seek their own gain, this stasis (if one even imagines that such a stasis ever arrives under the conditions of late capitalism) is not shalom. The peace is too precarious. With even the slightest maladjustment, the equation will unbalance. At best, this results in a breath of peace for a group of individuals instead of an enduring flourishing for the whole. This "peace" can be found in our gated communities and heavily patrolled luxury shopping centers. These are places where the dissonant are either removed by security or socially shunned by the citizenry of "targeted consumers."

This "peace" has its share of architectural typologies—notably the mall boom of the 1950s and '60s across the United States, fueled by both a desire for convenient consumerism and generous tax subsidies. [5] These eddies of seeming peace within American society—often marked by racial exclusion and the promotion of a single-minded "American Dream" that held insidious effects for the health of a more complex urban life—hosted distractions of window shopping and teen romance, marinated with the sound of pop music and the smell of buttered soft pretzels. Then the equation gradually unbalanced. Shopping dispersed into planned urban developments or moved online as an upstart book provider became an e-commerce juggernaut. The mall type struggled and collapsed because it lacked shalom, exploiting a manufactured tide of cultural prosperity that inevitably receded. Compare this to the mall's source material—the Italian piazza and the American main street. While these places experience the tides of consumerism as well, they have shalom potential in their stability as nodes along the path of the street. These places do not float as rafts within an ocean of parking but exist alongside the flow of our societies to provide respite and enjoyment. Shalom thrives within the flow of community collaboration in the pursuit of common goals.

Secondly, Wolterstorff states, "Shalom is absent when there is injustice, where people are wronged." Anyone who has experienced vastly different salaries among co-workers knows the delicate nature of this false "peace." Temporary contentment is not shalom. Wolterstorff complicates this

[5] Thomas W. Hanchett, "US Tax Policy and the Shopping-Center Boom of the 1950s and 1960s," the *American Historical Review*, vol. 101, no. 4 (October 1996): 1,082–1,110.

caveat by adding, “Shalom is absent even if those who are wronged do not mind being wronged, even if they feel content with their lot in life.” Under these criteria, even if the intern is content “working for experience,” shalom would not be present until they were equitably compensated. Akin to how a mature relationship has the ability to survive trivial disagreements, shalom has the ability to withstand destabilizing critique due to its equitable character.

This second caveat of shalom is especially challenging when considering the spectrum of injustices afflicting the city. Tormentors are legion. They inhabit the deferred maintenance beleaguering public commons and environmental habitats, spotlighting bureaucracy’s slow violence of neglect. [6] They are mapped within Foucault’s “carceral archipelago” of racially biased incarceration practices and in the laboriously surveilled whitetopian refuges from diversity. [7] They are amid those dispossessed by gentrifying colonizers who raise the toll of residence and erect barriers of entry. Facing the demons amid development, shalom must loosen its religious vestments to dialogue with contemporary challenges. An opportunity for this exists within the final facet of shalom and within the radius of a designer’s influence.

Finally, shalom can be as somatically felt as the physical realization of peace by an embodied soul, not an ethereal mind. The hedonism of prosperity celebrates humanity’s reality as thoughtful minds inhabiting tangible bodies. Locally, this shalom percolates through side-lot potlucks. In Detroit, vacant lots host somatic shalom as folding tables migrate out of dusty basements into the warm promise of summer. The lot swirls with the scent of decadent dishes, the smoke of sizzling street meats, and the chatter of family. Within this moment, the individual and group simultaneously celebrate and imbibe shalom. The culinary investment and relational maintenance required for this idyllic occasion demands laborious upkeep by its participants. Moreover, the contribution of privately owned possessions for communal consumption reiterates shalom’s pursuit of divine communion within the side lot’s radius of influence.

While this depth of peace is not easily reached, it is important to note that shalom is not perched atop a fleeting horizon. It can be tasted as it is pursued. Architecturally, this mise-en-scène is in the dialogue between table and vessel, the relationship between utensil and hand, and the symphony of scent and sound culminating into an experience where host, chef, and designer meet, mingle, and co-generate the prosperity of the participants. Flourishing must be felt and seen, but it is embodied when it is tasted.

If the “Grand Charter of Christians Practicing Architecture” is to pursue the shalom of the city, how does this translate into secular architectural development? Wolterstorff’s assessment is that, “more than any of the other arts, architecture determines whether the city and its inhabitants will experience shalom.” [8] His lecture introduces two methods to furnish shalom. The first is a methodology seeking the “fitting” enclosure of a program. While this method may not specifically pertain to the urban scale, it may lend itself to trends within contemporary Christendom that demand cautious admonishment:

WE ENCLOSE PLACES ON THE FACE OF THE EARTH FOR THE SAKE OF ACTIVITIES TO BE PERFORMED WITHIN THOSE PLACES, AND THAT WE DO SO BECAUSE WE JUDGE THAT ENCLOSING THE PLACE, AND DOING SO IN A PARTICULAR WAY, WILL ENABLE, AND PERHAPS ENHANCE AND FIT, THOSE ACTIVITIES. IF I AM

[6] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

[7] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977; New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

[8] Wolterstorff, “On Christ in Architecture.”

RIGHT ABOUT THIS, THEN THE PRACTICE OF THE ART OF ARCHITECTURE BEGINS BY IDENTIFYING THE ACTIVITIES TO BE PERFORMED WITHIN A PROPOSED ENCLOSURE AND GOES ON FROM THERE TO ASK WHAT SORT OF ENCLOSURE WOULD ENABLE, AND PREFERABLY ALSO ENHANCE AND FIT, THOSE ACTIVITIES. [9]

[9] Wolterstorff, "On Christ in Architecture."

To "enable and enhance" are straightforward in their allowing an activity and bettering that experience through the built environment. "Fittingness" is a result of Wolterstorff's work within his book *Art in Action*, which argues that value judgments rely on a spectrum of quality continua, often employing antonyms. [10] For example, the color blue more readily "fits" with sensations of cold or slow speeds than the color red. Projected onto architecture, this argument charges the designer with giving expression to forms of life. Wolterstorff continues:

[10] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Towards a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987).

THE PRACTICE OF THE ART OF ARCHITECTURE BEGINS BY IDENTIFYING A FORM OF LIFE. THE ARCHITECT THEN DESIGNS AN ENCLOSURE THAT WILL ENABLE, AND PREFERABLY ALSO ENHANCE AND FIT, THAT FORM OF LIFE. WE CAN SAY OF SUCH A DESIGN THAT IT GIVES EXPRESSION TO THAT FORM OF LIFE. [11]

[11] Wolterstorff, "On Christ in Architecture."

Following Churchill's apothegm that "we shape buildings and then those buildings shape us," [12] Wolterstorff gives agency to architectural spaces by envisioning enclosures that:

[12] Winston Churchill, address to the House of Commons, October 28, 1944.

FORCE US TO DO SOME THINGS THAT WE MIGHT OR MIGHT NOT WANT TO DO, AND PREVENT US FROM DOING OTHER THINGS THAT WE MIGHT WANT TO DO; THEY ENCOURAGE US TO DO SOME THINGS BY MAKING IT EASY TO DO THEM, AND DISCOURAGE US FROM DOING OTHER THINGS BY MAKING IT DIFFICULT. [13]

[13] Wolterstorff, "On Christ in Architecture."

Now is an excellent moment to address a few problematic pachyderms not so silently inhabiting these forms. Specifically, how architectural agency and the shotgun marriage between the moral and aesthetic may likely result in the exclusion of undesirable "forms of life" using architectural expression as a tool to maintain a status quo. This leveraging of contextualism toward a conservative agenda may result in an environment wherein dissonant lifestyles must either conform or withdraw. This results in a false "belonging" of the compliant consumer or a monocultural mindset that lives in fear of discordant whispers. This is not shalom. Rather, contextualism should seek the flourishing of its inhabitants by engaging the community, understanding social constructs and dynamics in order to form a "fitting" intervention in a cogenerative and collaborative way. This dethrones the starchitect-decreeing containers for "forms of life," inherently privileging some lifestyles while crowding out others. That is faux-shalom. It has been a flavor of Pax Christiana, which continues patterns of patriarchal dominance and the colonial/missional ideologies of social cultivation and pruning. It loudly pines for the "better days" when its regulations

went unchallenged by minority mindsets who lacked the critical mass to openly rebel. These corruptions clearly outline that “seeking the Shalom of the City” is a deeply political and social pursuit, which must be tempered accordingly.

It is frustrating to write so glowingly about the shared texts of the Judeo-Christian world as many socially minded believers/hopefuls are experiencing expulsion from the “Christian Nation.” Themes of isolative nationalism and active rejection of refugees, with walls and travel bans, seem to stand in stark contrast to core values of loving acceptance and selfless service. As “doom preppers” actively prepare for divine wrath against their neighbors, it seems that the faithful have forgotten that God would spare Sodom and Gomorrah if only a handful of believers were found within. [14] The theological perspective must be reclaimed from those who manipulate it as a form of cynical politics. An alternate future may be found within the second method of furnishing shalom, what Wolterstorff terms a “pocket of dissent.”

[14] Genesis 18:16–33.

Problematically, within the lecture, this “pocket of dissent” is only briefly referred to, theorized about, and then promptly left up to the listener’s interpretation—the theological equivalent of a “verify in field” note on a set of construction documents. The unfinished detailing of this tool is the source of its potential. It accepts individual limitation and empowers those with specialized or localized knowledge to determine how communal calculus meets its context. The description of the “pocket” hints at the size/scope of these installations, while “dissent” expresses the socially political process of shalom seeking.

Wolterstorff begins by encouraging the listener to reject the illusion that one can change society but then encourages the pursuit of a pocket of dissent, defined as a capsule of society to be changed. This level of pessimistic-optimism is exactly the paradoxical suspension I enjoy expecting from a theologian. A pocket of dissent accepts the finite reach of the designer’s agency while creating the charge that if it is within the designer’s reach, the work should be markedly different in that it pursues shalom. While the realization will differ based on the spectrum of supervision, what peace you can manage you are charged to create. He describes pockets of dissent as

URBAN ENCLOSURES AND BUILDING ENCLOSURES ABOUT WHICH ONE SAYS, HERE SOMETHING DIFFERENT IS GOING ON. HERE THE INHABITANTS CAN FLOURISH, INSOFAR AS THAT IS POSSIBLE IN OUR CONTEMPORARY CITIES. HERE THEY ARE NOT FORCED TO LIVE AND TRAVEL AMIDST AESTHETIC SQUALOR; HERE THERE IS SOME BEAUTY. HERE THEY ARE TREATED WITH DIGNITY. HERE THERE IS SOME SEMBLANCE OF JUSTICE. [15] [16]

[15] Wolterstorff, “On Christ in Architecture.”

And perhaps such pockets do have the potential to collaborate along common allegiances to realize larger interventions or systemic changes. There are many challenges that require a critical mass to even merit a seat at the decision-making table. If communities can honestly celebrate their similarities and goals, a unified and consistent collaboration can be a dangerous foe to contemporary themes of corporate servanthship.

[16] “Aesthetic squalor” is an unfortunate reference to themes of moral aestheticism discussed above.

With shalom, the method by which peace is reached is just as important as its realization. Since shalom is absent when injustice exists, it must flow freely throughout the experience of the group and cannot trickle down

from on high. This rejects the starchitect saviors and demands a collaborative professional. Herein, designers are discouraged from puppeting strings toward personal preference and are challenged to weave their stakeholders' aspirations into the urban fabric.

Exemplar pockets of dissent exist in varying sizes and shapes. One can dissent with something as expansive as a planned unit development or as small as an enclosure. One thoughtfully orchestrated room is all that is necessary to create a moment wherein the designer states, "Here we are different, here we are just, and here we seek shalom." The charge of providing purposeful spaces given flavor by equitable relationships with the opportunity for physical enjoyment is a challenge designers can realize within a wide spectrum of their projects. While there is no blueprint for shalom, hopefully an outline has emerged for what it can be and what it is not. Seek first the shalom of the city, and in this you will find your shalom—please verify in field.